

Hawaiian Historian

Dr. Billy Bergin's chronicles of cattle ranching & cowboys on the Big Island

By Joe Montgomery

Dr. Billy Bergin at the Case Memorial Veterinary Hospital in Waimea — Hawaii's first combined large and small animal veterinary hospital.



Photo courtesy of Dr. Bergin

Say Aloha to cattle ranching

Although Hawaii is well-known for hula skirts and surf boards, you may not realize that it is also home to a historic and extensive cattle ranching industry. Thanks to a K-State veterinary alumnus, Dr. Billy Bergin, you can now learn much more about Hawaii's Parker Ranch and its cowboy history through a series of books called "Loyal to the Land: the Legendary Parker Ranch."

"I set out in 1996 on what I thought would be a six-month project," Dr. Bergin said. "After two years, I realized it was going to have to be done in two volumes. After three or four years, I realized it was going to have to be in three volumes, but now it's built out to be such a huge history, there will be a fourth volume, which should be finished in 2012."

Dr. Bergin gave copies of the first two volumes to the CVM library, but it's also available through other libraries and book retailers.

From Kona to Kansas and Kentucky

How does Dr. Bergin know so much about the ranch and island? Partly because he was born there. He is a third-generation Hawaiian with an interesting family history.

"The original Billy Bergin came to Honolulu from Ireland in 1888 and did the most noble thing an Irishman could do — he opened a saloon!" Dr. Bergin said.

Dr. Bergin explains that it was more of a hotel with a restaurant and bar, but that it became a haven for retired Irish

sailor-bachelors who would live their life out on the islands.

"Those men pretty much became fond of my father as a baby boy, and in growing up, they sent him to private parochial schools and then on to medical school in Nebraska," Dr. Bergin said. His father later established a medical practice on Kona, the Big Island, which was made up of mostly sugar plantation and ranch personnel.

"I was born and raised on a plantation," Dr. Bergin said. "Plantations had adjacent ranches

because the untillable land was put into cattle. The exposure as a little boy to stables full of draft horses and mules, as well as with my father taking me on house calls in those country villages made me grow up wanting to be a veterinarian. I chose

to go to a Midwestern school where the reputation for large animal medicine was stronger and more historic than at other veterinary colleges."

In 1959, Dr. Bergin went to K-State and proceeded to get a bachelor's degree in agriculture in 1963 and then his DVM degree in 1967.

"Halfway through veterinary school I started on a master's degree, which meant I would have to do the collection of embryos and fetuses for the University of Kentucky," Dr. Bergin

said. "The faculty let me work on my master's degree by carrying extra credit and doing summer studies."

"When writing comes easy for you, you should publish."

While in Kentucky, Dr. Bergin was working with a well-known equine pathologist, Dr. Jim Rooney.

"I would help Dr. Rooney conduct postmortems on 15 to 20 insured thoroughbreds," Dr. Bergin said. "Because they're insured, mostly by Lloyd's of London, they demanded pathologists do the postmortem. Dr. Rooney was also the guy who would review my writings of the postmortem examination. 'When you do this graduate work, don't simply write a thesis,' he said. 'When writing comes easy for you, you should publish.'"

"I did that. I presented my first formal paper at the American Association of Equine Practitioners

national convention in New Orleans. From that thesis, it grew to include 12 different scientific papers on the embryology of the horse."

After finishing his master's degree in 1968, Dr. Bergin went back to Kona and opened a veterinary practice.

Because of the demands of the practice, he no longer had time to write, but his career would eventually become part of his inspiration to write later in life.

A Smart offer at the Parker Ranch

"After about two years in private practice, the owner of the Parker Ranch, which was basically next door, asked me to come by and be interviewed to be their resident veterinarian," Dr. Bergin recalled.

Photo courtesy of Dr. Bergin



Dr. Bergin leads a horse named Princess.

Not wanting to put all his eggs in one basket, Dr. Bergin offered to help the ranch owner, Richard Smart, and his manager find an appropriate veterinarian who would suit them. Instead, the Parker Ranch still preferred to hire Dr. Bergin and agreed to let him come aboard as a retained veterinarian, which began July 1, 1970.

"What I did in the next few years was develop a group practice because the whole area began to develop," Dr. Bergin said. "Even though I was retained by the Parker Ranch, they had my entire devotion because of the size of the operation. There were about 300 brood mares and a broad selection of stallions. The total number of cattle was 50,000, which boils down to 18,000 mother cows. I was only 29 years old, so you can imagine the sudden and very profound baptism by fire."

"I had two things going for me. I had already been familiar with the personnel in the field, especially in a situation where people trusted me and knew that I'd already seen a lot of situations that would merit judgment. The other side was the education I got at K-State's College of Veterinary Medicine, where there's great emphasis on the practical side of practice. Most of our professors or instructors were former practitioners who were able to expose you to a lot of situations, just in the routine of taking course work from them. That gave me a great deal of confidence, not overconfidence, but confidence in being able to take on this account."

Dr. Bergin continued as the lead veterinarian for Parker Ranch until July 1, 1995 — 25 years of service to the day. At that time, he sold his ownership in the group veterinary practice to the younger doctors and then went back into solo practice.

Tragic turning point

While Dr. Bergin's veterinary career was successful, he also had a rewarding family life. He and his wife, Pat, who is

a K-State graduate of the College of Education with a bachelor's degree in 1964 and master's in 1968. They had three sons: Brady, Holi and William N.; and one daughter: Erin. In a sad twist of fate, the Bergins lost Holi in 1995, who had just been admitted to the college of veterinary medicine at Colorado State University.

"Part of the reason I sold my group practice was because I had just lost my son and I wanted solitude to be very ample in terms of trying to deal with the situation," Dr. Bergin said. "I began to become very reflective and I was very much alone a lot of the time, so I decided to write a paper for the American Veterinary History Society, part of the AVMA, and gave it at the Louisville convention in 1996. It was called 'The First Century of Veterinary Medicine on the Big Island.'"

The paper became a turning point for Dr. Bergin, as he received encouragement to take his writing further and focus on a topic within his paper: the Parker Ranch.

"After I presented my paper, people pointed to the fact that Parker Ranch had done so much to foster veterinary medicine on the islands," Dr. Bergin said. "I had taken the time in my 25 years as the lead veterinarian to keep very comprehensive annual animal health reports. When I stepped down, the ranch gave me a gift, which was a bound volume of every report I wrote — it's 4 inches thick! That alone was an inspiration to use that material and write the ranch's history."

Good news came for the Bergins when their son Brady decided to become a veterinarian. He was a senior

in high school when Holi died, and the loss of his brother solidified his decision. He graduated from Colorado State in 2002 and took over his father's practice in September 2007.

In the works

In addition to his volumes on the Parker Ranch, Dr. Bergin has several other projects under way.

"I'm nearly finished with a book that I'm enjoying more than anything else, which is the history of the feral horse of

Hawaii," he said. "We have our own brand of mustangs. I'm busy working with UC Davis to confirm the DNA of these horses to show they were descendants of the Spanish horses brought here in 1803."

Dr. Bergin is also involved in the Paniolo Preservation Society (paniolo is Hawaiian for cowboy), which has provided source material for some of his other book ventures, such as a coffee table book to be titled "The Cowboy Life of the Far West." He is also co-authoring a biography on Richard Smart.

"You can see that one paper on the 100 years of veterinary service on the Big Island grew into the Parker Ranch book, which then grew into a huge array of books on the history of ranching on the islands," Dr. Bergin said. "Naturally, I can't help but include a lot of veterinary progress in it, because we like to write about our profession, so there's a lot of that in there. Being able to write like this is just a blessing that causes me to look at it more as an obligation to put information in print so it's preserved."

And as they say, the rest is history. 🐾

