

The Making of a Chili Ranch

By Ken Large

Writers note: In 1989 CASI membership numbered at 260 with 47 Life members. In July of 2005, membership has reached a total of 1629; this includes 484 Life members, 45 Commercial members and 24 VIP members. In 15 years, CASI-affiliated Pods have increased from 46 to 69. In 1989, 370 chili cookoffs were held, with 260 cooks qualifying; in 2004, CASI recognized 558 cookoffs, with 464 cooks qualifying. I believe these increases in numbers in a 15- year period are a result of the 1989 CASI Board of Directors' decision to purchase land on which to hold the Terlingua International Chili Championship that they named Rancho CASI de los Chisos. This is my story of the beginning of The Ranch and is dedicated to the hundreds of volunteers whose hard work and dedication have made The Ranch into what it is today.

Getting Started

On Monday, February 17, 1990 at about noon as Rex Jones, CASI President, was about to address the 100-or-so cooks and locals at the dedication ceremony for Rancho CASI de los Chisos, a blast of dynamite of unknown origin {to us} sent a cloud of dust and debris floating in the sky. It probably wasn't meant to be but as it turned out, it was a good omen for chili cooks, as like the dedication ceremony, it signaled a new era and a new beginning for the Terlingua International Chili Championship.



CASI Board President Rex Jones with microphone; other Directors in picture - to the right in checked shirt, Secretary Robert Bell, Letterwriter Chair Bobby Aldridge, ED Pat Irvine, Sponsor Chair Bruce Pinnell, Treasurer Bob Whitefield; to far right in suit with "can of coke", Sponsor Chair Ray King. The 1989 CASI Board of Directors had previously made a decision to purchase a parcel of land to have as a permanent cookoff site for TICC. And it wasn't as if this Board didn't have a full plate. They were committed to: Revising the CASI Sponsorships as pertaining to TICC, selecting a permanent trophy for TICC winners, working on obtaining 501 C (3) status for CASI, retiring a \$12,000.00 plus legal fee, finding a piece of land to buy, handling CASI's normal business, plus getting ready for the Great Peppers' Meeting in September and planning 1989 TICC at the Mines.

At the June Board Meeting in 1989, the Board authorized Vann York, CASI President, to look for available land in the area. There were 317.5 acres that adjoined the mines to the west for sale for \$150.00 per acre, and this was the site that was settled on. As CASI's coffers were not too full at the time, the Board had to come up with a way to make the down payment on the land. Bob Whitefield, CASI Treasurer, suggested that shares be sold to CASI members, so they might own a "piece of the rock" and also have a permanent cooking spot, if they so desired. Bob later named the shares "The Old 320", which the Board agreed would be sold for \$200.00 per share. The 320 shares, when sold, would raise \$64,000.00 which would be enough to pay for the land, with the balance being used for improvements. More on this later!

The day after TICC in 1989, on a Sunday, the CASI Board of Directors called all Great Peppers, along with the Tolbert Cookoff board, to a meeting in Lajitas, where they announced the plans for the land purchase. By inviting the Tolbert group, they were making an attempt to unify the two cookoffs as they were before 1983. This attempt, along with further negotiations in the next year, failed to be fruitful so the duo-beat goes on.

The "Old 320" plan however, was an instant hit with CASI members and only 30 days later, at the December 1989 Board Meeting, 55 shares had been sold. By the time November 1990 TICC rolled around, 109 share holders were to meet and select sites in the Old 320. Don't you love it when a plan comes together?



Photo by Johnye Hamman

Doing Some Surveying

In December 1989, Bob Whitefield, who had responsibility for land clearing, roads, electricity, cook sites, spectator area and stage area, flew into Midland, Texas. He had previously made arrangements to be picked up at the airport by Bill Simpson and me to go to the ranch site in Terlingua. On the way down, Bob explained that the owners of the Mariposa Mines had cleared all the vegetation from the cooks and spectators areas sometime in the 1920's and had used the site as a staging area for loading ore wagons to haul cinnabar to Marfa; but quite a bit had grown back.

Arriving at the ranch, we unloaded our surveying equipment, which consisted of a magnetic compass, a 200-foot tape, lathes and small stakes, some colored ribbon, and a 360 degree "see thru" compass for making the drawings. We stayed 3 days and 2 nights laying out the roads, cooks and spectators sites, and marking the area for judging, stage, and a medics area. Walking the grounds as much as we did, we found ample evidence of past water gathering and storage systems, and a few staked mining claims of pyramided rocks with faded and illegible writing.

Only one claim, however, had been filed on this land at the Courthouse. Finishing our chores, we returned Bob to the Midland Airport. On leaving, he asked if we might get some time off to return to the site on February 17th (dedication day) and

possibly stay for a week to help with the actual clearing and road building, which we agreed to do. *Drawing of the cooks area after survey by Bob Whitefield*



Clearing the Land

Returning on February 17, we took along Jerry King. Jerry had learned to operate heavy equipment in the oil patch, building roads and locations, and later honed these skills with a hitch in the Seabees of the US Navy. Although it had been 20 or more years since he had handled the controls, he said he still remembered how. And sure enough, he did! So, after the invocation by H. Ray King, CASI Sponsorship Chairman, a welcome from Board President Rex Jones, and introductions by CASI ED Pat Irvine, Bob Whitefield took the guests on a tour of the site. As the dedication ceremonies ended, we said our goodbyes and commenced to work.

The Board had rented a D-4 Cat, a huge front end loader, and a Road Grader (with operator) from Mr. Mischer, who at that time owned the town of Lajitas. The D-4 was a tad small for what was needed of it, as Jerry had to cut back into the hillside for the judging, stage and medics area. As one wag said of the D-4, “I need to buy one of those and take it home for my kid to play with.” In spite of its smallness, Jerry managed to get the sites in good order with the little D-4. He also tutored Bill and me in the operation of the front end loader, which we used to further smooth the Old 320 grounds and gather debris to haul away from the site. We thought we could

finish the entire place in a week, but the laid back work ethic of the region held us back. They really didn't see the need to get up at six o'clock, have breakfast and go to it. Most days, our operator for the road grader arrived about 10:30 am and left at 4:30pm. However, at the end of the week we liked only the new portion of the cooks' site from being finished. So, we headed home again.



Our road grader operator doing some land clearing at the cooks' site

In April 1990, the Black Gold Pod held a cookoff benefiting CASI site preparation. After conferring with CASI officials, we decided the money raised would be used to bury electric cable from the meter pole to the medics area, judging area, and stage area. Later that same month, Jerry King, Ed Kelley, Bill Simpson and I went to the Ranch to do the work. Along with the cable, boxes, and electrical connections, we took with us a sign donated by Puget Pod to be installed at the entrance of the cooks' amping area. Again, we stayed at the site for 3 days and 3 nights installing the cable, boxes and electrical outlets. Shouldn't have taken so long, but the temperatures had started to rise a little at that time, and we were advised to take along lots of liquid refreshments.

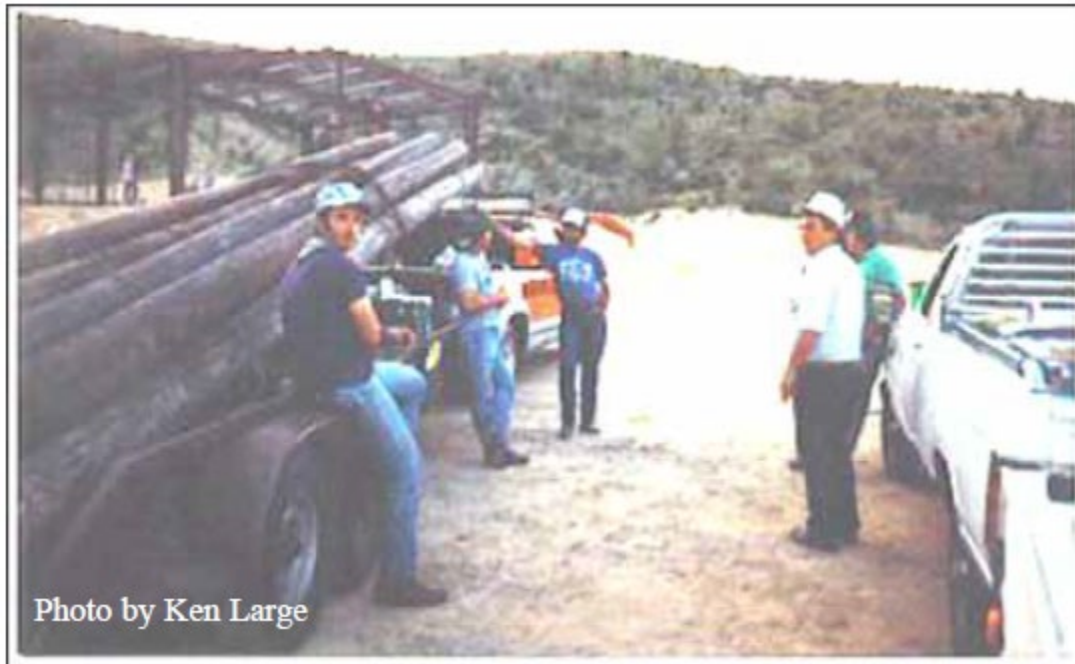


Left to Right, Ronnie Daniels (worked with Otto), Larry Otto (Sign Painter) Jerry King, Ken Large, Jay Gurley and Larry Burruss (Sign Painter).



A weedy row, a dull hoe and a mean boss. Bill Simpson, Ed Kelley and Jerry King putting the finishing touches on cable installation.

Later in the summer - must have been in July - Larry Burruss, Larry Otto and Jay Gurley (or LL&J as they were known for their volunteer efforts on just about anything that needed to be done in the chili world) came to the site to install a sign at the main entrance. The materials for the sign had been purchased in a joint effort by Purgatory Creed Pod, State of Texas Pod and San Antonio Pod.



Quite a load to haul from Austin to Terlingua. Left to right in picture is Jay Gurley, Larry Otto, Unknown, Larry Burruss and Jerry King. The load consisted of 7-40 ft highline poles, 24 sheets of 4x8 5/8th plywood, and all the equipment needed for installation of same.

LL&J had previously hired a rock digger truck from Marfa to punch the holes for the poles. Holes were dug in a V-shape as the sign was to be two-sided so it might be seen from either direction from the highway. The digger truck also dug a hole for a night light that Otto had brought from Austin. It had a bulb of about a million watts and once hooked up would light almost the whole cooks' area. This light showed the way back to the site at night for many years, before it was replaced.

It took about 3 days of hard work to install the sign, as the 4x8 sheets of plywood had to be hoisted up one at a time and secured in place. To do this, Larry Otto and an electric lineman friend of his had to put on hooks and climb the poles, and then

the plywood was raised up with the use of a linesman hoist with ropes and pulleys, and then held while they were secured in place.



The sign was finished, just a few touch-ups with the paint brushes.

AS the work on the sign was happening, contractors were busy working on the judging area building. At the time, the size of the judging area looked adequate; it has since been doubled in size and is still a little crowded on Saturday at TICC.

A footnote on the sign: Unfortunately for us, some locals took an immediate dislike to the sign at the main entrance and sometime during January 1991 spent a lot of time and hard work cutting it down. These culprits were never found or prosecuted for trespassing and destruction of private property.

Construction at the site continued in 1990 and by November of that year was about complete as designed. Work at Rancho CASI de los Chisos has not ceased in the 15 years of its existence. It just keeps getting bigger and better each year. As I said at the start, thanks to the hard work and dedication of all the Directors and volunteers.



CASI

