

## Untamed

Story & photos by Anita Westervelt, South Texas Border Chapter

This is a story about a ranch, a donkey, a horse and a Texas Master Naturalist who loves the land and native habitat as only a Texas Master Naturalist could.



Camille with her horse, King, at El Mesteño Ranch

Upon arrival at the ranch, protocol was followed, and we were first introduced to the two resident Ranch Ambassadors. I expected to fall in love with the donkey, and of course I did. He is charming, funny, happy and friendly. Chicle is his name; he occasionally wears a hat and knows how to doff it to the ladies. Camille explained that chicle, in Spanish, means gum, used to describe someone who is always tagging along. Her analogy is like when gum gets stuck to your shoe.

Chicle is a Jerusalem Donkey who came to the ranch when he was about two years old to keep the horse company through thick and thin, according to Camille. Chicle is coming up on his 14<sup>th</sup> birthday.

Camille Rich, a member of the South Texas Border Chapter of Texas Master Naturalists, is as knowledgeable as she is generous, truly embracing the creed of a naturalist, inviting groups to her ranch, and sharing the history and austere beauty of this ancient land with which she has been entrusted.

Upon Camille's invitation, our small group embarked on an adventure from the southern corner of Cameron County to Camille's ranch in the far reaches of northwest Hidalgo County, near Puerto Rico, Texas. A mere 70 miles, kind of as the crow flies, but worlds apart.



Chicle, the donkey, says Hi!

Horses are herd animals, hence the companion. King, a powerful American Quarter Horse, registered with the American Quarter Horse Association, came to the ranch when he was around three years old. He will turn 25 on March 15. His full name is Bar King's Review; because of some of his personality traits, like curiosity, he has been dubbed, Snoop. King stands a magnificent 17 hands high and elicits his fair share of attention from visitors.

Besides Camille, King and Chicle are the only tame inhabitants of this 12-acre spread that fittingly Camille has named El Mesteño Ranch and Arboretum. Mesteño, she explains, means wild or untamed. As for arboretum, looking in any direction is like the who's who of trees in the Al Richardson/Ken King *Plants of Deep South Texas* book. Black brush, catclaw acacia, wild olive and Spanish dagger are blooming; brasil, granjeno, mesquite and colima populate the sandscape throughout – I think I spied a coma – all the old friends.

I say sandscape. For someone accustomed to mid-south Cameron County clay soil and its lush spring new vegetation each year, I was amazed at the contrast. We were standing on what appeared to be drought-parched red sand. Camille has done her homework. She participated in a



soil survey and found that the soil is called alfisol, and that the sands were actually deposited over the caliche; she offered a precise description from a University of Texas web presentation by Bob Harms on sand sheet plants that explained: "The region is defined by a sheet of eolian sand blown inland from the shoreline of the Gulf of Mexico during Holocene times, a sheet that covers most of Kenedy and Brooks counties as well as the northern tips of Willacy, Hidalgo and Starr counties."

Windblown red sand deposited over caliche

We see evidence of sand erosion, exposing boulders of caliche as we begin a walking tour though the scrub. The boys, as Camille refers to King and Chicle, have free range when guests aren't present – they tend to tag along and demand attention, so they are penned until the end of the trail tour. The animals have their special ranch duties: they maintain the trails as they go about their daily routines while Camille, who lives in Edinburg, is not at the ranch. There are many trails that the boys have carved; it's best to keep up with Camille and not get lost, but especially to hear all her stories, explanations, preservation efforts and identifications of the sand sheet flora, many that are unfamiliar to me.

Camille cautions us to watch our step where the trail is dotted with javelina, bobcat, donkey and horse scat – and maybe fox. Birds and butterflies populate the trees and blooming vegetation. Lizards scurry for cover. Camille is dedicated to protecting what she has to the extent of constructing sturdy, labor intensive areas for plants she wants to keep from going extinct. She

has creatively devised, through trial and error – and shared ideas with experts like author Ken King – various designs for exclosures to prevent javelina, rabbits and other critters from destroying rare cacti, manfreda and other plants.



(L-R) Silky evolvulus, bracted sida and round head broom weed brighten the sandscape.

We head back to the corral through a path where tiny blooming plants have pushed through the sand: silky evolvulus (*Evolvulus sericeus*), bracted sida, also called bracted fanpetal, (*Sida ciliaris*), bristleleaf pricklyleaf, also called tiny Tim, (*Thymophylla tenuiloba*), and cow pen daisies (*Verbesina encelioides*), dwarfed by the drought and taller roundleaf snakeweed, also known as round head broom (*Gutierrezia sphaerocephala*), with its brilliant yellow blooms atop hard, spindly-looking branches. We stop to examine all the tiny blooms and marvel as we explore new territory.

Being able to share what she has helps Camille fulfill her passion, dreams and goals for this sparse, enduring land.

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The watering hole at El Mesteno Ranch.