



THE GAME RANCH

Texan runs Stone Mountain's classroom

To Georgians, at least, Art Rilling is the second most famous graduate of Southwest Texas State Teachers College. No. 1, of course, is the late President of the United States Lyndon B. Johnson.

In his way, Rilling is as much a shaker and mover as LBJ, but on a smaller scale. Johnson's Great Society took in the entire nation; Rilling's Game Ranch is but one part of Stone Mountain Park.

On the other hand, all the "citizens" of the Game Ranch love Rilling. At least half the country had less than warm fuzzies for Johnson. That's the difference between dealing with animals and people. Animals love the hand that feeds them; people bite it.

Animals at the Game Ranch, in fact, love any hand that feeds them. The first encounter a visitor usually has is with a panhandling deer nuzzling his hand, looking for some food. At least one person has become aware of the wildlife by a deer chewing on his shirttail. The average reaction from the human visitor is a squeal of delight or frozen awe.

Rilling usually has more trouble with the humans roaming the Game Ranch than the animals.

He's been attacked by a woman, who thought he was deer hunting. In fact, he was going to shoot a deer with a tranquilizer gun so that the veterinarian could treat a sore leg. The lady grabbed the gun and fought with him.

He's had reactions — from both extremes — when a doe decided to give birth to a pair of fawns on the main path through the ranch. One visitor ranted and raved at Rilling about the indecency of it all, while another relieved parent said it was the perfect chance to broach a subject he'd been procrastinating over for months.

There are the heartbreaking moments, too, such as the killing of two bucks a few years back. Some lunatic shot the two deer through the fence with his bow and arrow and just left them there. The senseless act left Rilling, his staff and anyone else who heard about it shocked. People still talk about it.

Running loose in the 10-acre preserve along with bucks, does and fawns are peacocks, ducks and squirrels. There are pens for gophers, quail, raccoons, hawks, coyotes, foxes, bears, buffalo, horses and a cougar. And a petting farm with smaller farm animals for the little children.

The deers are the stars, though, but the bear cubs give them a run for their money. The habitat is as wild as possible, and this enables the visitor to see deer in a natural state. It's exciting, to say the least, to see a magnificent, 8-point buck reclining in a culvert 50 or so yards from you. Or be scanning a

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wooded hill and spot as many as six hiding fawns.

Run into something like that out in the wild and it's enough to make your heart stop. The effect in the Game Ranch is similar.

Presently, there are three fawns in a pen. One is an orphan. The other two are the ones born on the pathway. Rilling and his crew moved the babies to a more sheltered spot and momma moved them back on the path — three times. Now, she just shows up at the pen at feeding time and someone lets her inside.

So, how did a Texan with a pedigree similar to LBJ's wind up in Atlanta? As usual, by accident.

Upon graduating from Southwest State, Rilling joined the Marines, attended their Platoon Leaders Course at Quantico, Va., and found himself in Korea shortly thereafter, an artillery forward observer. He had missed the Inchon Landing and the march from the Chosin Reservoir, but there was enough action for anyone.

Rilling went back to his hometown of San Antonio in central Texas to teach mathematics, science and history at his old high school and he might have been principal there today except the Marines called again.

The Corps has reserve districts throughout the country, staffed for the most part by regular officers, but there is a billet for a reserve in each one and Rilling put in a bid for a space in San Antonio. At least he thought it was San Antonio. He wound up in Atlanta.

Rilling rose to the rank of full colonel in his six-year stay here. As his final year rolled around, Rilling had to make some big decisions and one, of course, was what he wanted for the future.

At about the same time, Stone Mountain Park was about to become a reality and Rilling thought it might be just the right place for something he'd been thinking about for years.

"My wife and I have enjoyed riding around in the country looking at deer and other wildlife since we were in school," Rilling said. "We thought if we liked it, others might too."

Rilling said he had had some thoughts about a ride-through wild game ranch in Texas similar to the defunct Lion Country Safari. There were a lot of problems, though,

such as the difficulty of seeing raccoons, and other small animals from a moving car. The idea of a walk-through park with animals roaming free began to grow.

It took 18 months to convince the powers that be at Stone Mountain Park that the Game Ranch was a good idea. But the Marines teach persistence and Rilling wore them down. He's been there since 1962.

The beginnings were small, but not meager. It wasn't too long before Rilling was receiving injured animals, plus several "deserted" fawns. There is a on-going education program about fawns and leaving them alone and the Game Ranch graphically illustrates how does take care of their young.

You hear it almost daily: "Oh, the poor thing! His mother left him all alone!" The exclamations are from human parents, who also feel the need to get away from their own offspring on occasion, yet can't understand that animals might need the same breaks. But wait around long enough and the mama deer always returns for feeding time.

The buffalos, awesome as they are, didn't make the kind of impression hoped they would. Especially after the efforts it took to get them. Rilling had one cow and wanted to add to that display as soon as the opportunity presented itself.

There is an annual government auction out west of surplus buffalo. The first thing a person must do is get on the list to bid. This took Rilling about four years. The day finally came and he and his son took a horse trailer and high hopes to bid.

They came back with two wild buffalos that didn't want to leave the trailer when they arrived at the Game Ranch. Try as they might, Rilling and his helpers had no luck at all. Then, a strange thing happened.

"That cow walked over to the trailer and just touched her nose to the ones in the trailer and they backed right out," Rilling said. And have never caused another moment's trouble.

Rilling says he doesn't particularly care for cats, but he plays with a cougar almost daily. The mountain lion was a pet that outgrew her surroundings and was donated to the Game Ranch. At play with Rilling, she looks more like an overgrown Siamese cat than a lion. She purrs, gnaws softly at his hands, rolls over and swats at him — all in fun. Really. And if Rilling doesn't like cats, he loves this lion. Just watch his face when the two play.

That love for all his animals is what has made the Game Ranch one of the big attractions at Stone Mountain Park for the past 19 years. And Rilling's not wasting his teaching degree, either. The Game Ranch is a big classroom on the outdoors.

Rilling has a daily play session with Game Ranch's mountain lion

Photo — Kent Mitchell