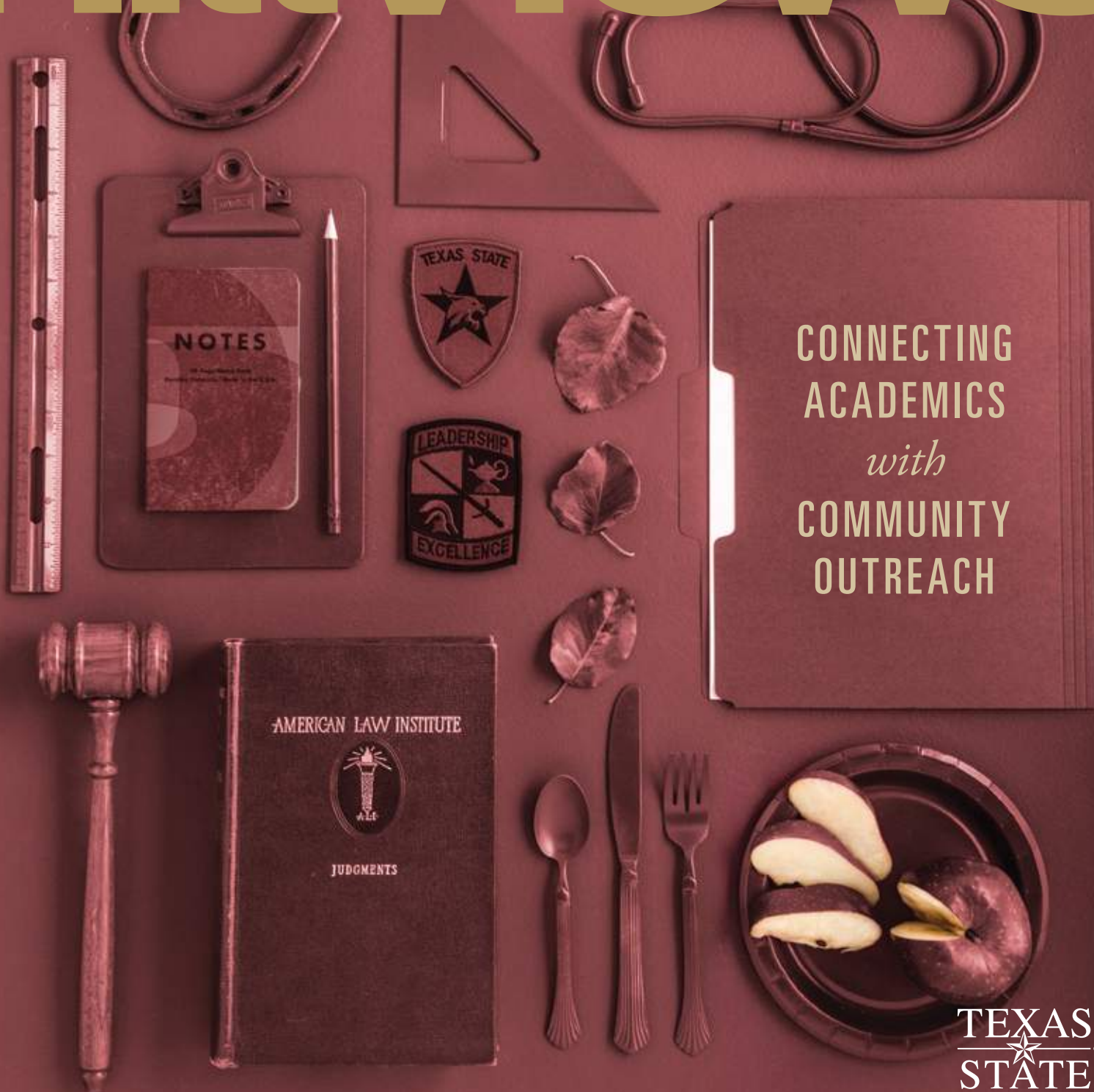


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FREEMAN CENTER

UNIVERSITY MANAGES A TEXAS-SIZE SWATH OF LAND FOR RESEARCH
By Ashley Festa

More than 4,000 acres in the Texas Hill Country are dedicated to supporting Texas State University’s research opportunities — and any other project a student might want to do.

“There aren’t many things I can think of that we haven’t done out here,” says Chris Thomas, facilities manager at the Freeman Center. “I don’t know that we’ve ever told anybody no.”

“If you’re in fine arts, and you want to do some landscape painting, we’d support that,” says Dr. Donald Huebner, director of Freeman Center. “If you called me up and said you’re an English major and you need a quiet place to write poetry, I’d say ‘OK, we’ll find you a spot.’ Any activity that enhances student learning or student research outcomes, we’ll support that.”

THE FREEMAN CENTER'S PRIMARY GOAL IS ENHANCING RESEARCH AND TRAINING OPPORTUNITIES.

The Freeman Center, often called Freeman ranch, is a parcel of land held in a perpetual trust as the Harold M. Freeman Educational Foundation. The Freeman brothers, Harry and Joe, bought the land in 1941 to use for recreational purposes — hunting, fishing, hiking, and their legendary poker games. In the 1980s, Harry Freeman bequeathed 3,485 acres to be used for farm, ranch, and game management, and educational and research purposes. The university is the operating trustee of the land. Joe Freeman's ranch land is managed by Frost National Bank.

As the on-site manager, Thomas supports visitors' needs in countless ways. He's collected air samples for students analyzing weather data, and he's helped build a structure to hold a wind vane. He cares for the ranch's herd of cattle, gives tours, clears brush, digs holes and maintains equipment. His work varies so much that there's no such thing as a typical day for him. Thomas and his family make their home at the ranch. Two student workers also live on the ranch land full time.

"We're on call 24 hours a day, seven days a week, 365 days a year," Thomas says. "There's not a time in the day that I haven't had my phone ring or door knocked on."

That's because there's always something happening out at the ranch. Members of the university's ROTC programs hold nighttime activities out at the ranch, sometimes arriving at midnight. Deer hunters come in as early as 4 a.m. Not a week goes by that someone isn't visiting the ranch, sometimes as many as a half-dozen groups at a time.

The ranch has frequent visits from agriculture majors conducting research on the 90+ head of cattle and other livestock. Students in animal science classes benefit from working with live animals, learning to use sonograms and palpate pregnant cows to estimate their trimester, giving vaccinations, and even trying their hand at artificial insemination. Professors often give a hands-on exam out at the ranch at the end of a class. Dr. Ken Mix oversees the student sustainable farm, a 1-acre experimental and teaching farm that utilizes alternative crops and sustainable practices.

The Freeman Center is different from typical commercial facilities because it's not focused on the business side of ranching. As part of the university, its primary goal is enhancing research

and training opportunities. But with the research component comes concerns about humane treatment, because the animals are part of a living laboratory. Their welfare is protected under the Institutional Animal Care and Use Committee, which oversees and evaluates the care they receive.

Besides ranching, the land also hosts non-agriculture student and faculty activities, such as forensic science, archaeological, and anthropological studies at the Forensic Anthropology Center at Texas State, comprised of about 30 gated acres within the Freeman Center. As one of only seven outdoor decomposition facilities in the world, scholars come from all corners of the earth to conduct research. Donated cadavers are securely placed at the center for researchers to use in evaluating any changes that occur in the ecosystem post-mortem. Entomologists, soil scientists, microbiologists, anthropologists, and law enforcement forensic scientists use the center for advanced training.

"Our students have better training and have seen more bodies decomposing than most professionals have," says Dr. Daniel Wescott, director of the Forensic Anthropology Center. "Most people gain that experience having read about it and over years in their professions. Our students, even after only a couple years, they've seen 70 bodies decomposed."

Students have unique opportunities out at the Freeman Center, and Huebner says the ranch itself is special for Texas State. It's the only university that manages significant ranch land in the Hill Country, an area with many types of ecosystems, providing a rich environment for research and stewardship.

"The Freeman brothers donated this land to enhance the education of Texas State University students. Our mission is to make sure that we honor that request. We are also charged with maintaining the integrity of this landscape and making sure that future generations of students will continue to have access to this amazing ecosystem," Huebner says.

The Forensic Anthropology Center at Texas State relies on body donations to continue its educational research support. For more information on the donation program, visit www.txstate.edu/anthropology/facts. 🌱

