

COLLEGE STATION -- The first thought of a barbed wire collection might be an image of a big ball of tangled, rusted wire. But Gaylon Lane, a retired soil scientist, has neatly assembled some 269 pieces of barbed wire that represent decades of ranching history throughout the Southwest.

"I saw this piece of wire in a fence one day and I just thought I needed to start collecting wire," said Lane, pointing to a piece of wire called the "Stubbe Plate" patented in 1883.

Lane's collection, which has carefully been tacked to 5-foot tall, fold-out panels, has a new home inside the Animal Industries Building at Texas A&M University. It's now an educational tool for rangeland ecology and management students as well as the general public wanting to know more about the history of barbed wire.

"This is a great find for our department," said Wayne Hamilton, director for the Center for Grazing Lands and Ranch Management at A&M. "The history of barbed wire ties very closely to the history of rangeland in the southwest and the use of livestock for grazing those land areas. We're really excited to have this here at A&M for our students."

During Lane's 35-year career with the Natural Resource and Conservation Service, an agency that works to conserve and sustain natural resources, he saw many different types of fences and barbed wire.

"(Once I got interested in collecting) I joined an association of wire collectors in Texas," said Lane, who lives in Temple. "I traded with people in several states, I rarely bought any wire. Most of the wire that I've collected was over a 10-year period. By today's standards, this is considered a small collection."

Lane began his collection in 1965. Each piece is organized by patent and alphabetized by the name of the person who patented the wire. The oldest piece of wire in Lane's collection dates back to 1853, a snake-ribbon pattern called the "Meriwether."

"Most all of the wires were patented and manufactured before 1900," Lane said. "What happened was we had a barbed wire revolution where everybody had a different idea of what kind of wire they needed."

Hamilton said when barbed wire first was introduced in the 1870s, it received mixed reviews.

"I've got an article written by a gentleman who was in Zavala County back in the 1870s," Hamilton said. "He said when the first barbed wire came into that part of the country some people didn't like it a little bit and proceeded to immediately cut it. Some trouble ensued, but over time it settled and became accepted that there was not going to be anymore free and open range."

"It (barbed wire) changed the whole aspect of grazing livestock on western rangeland."

Lane's collection began to grow after acquiring the famed "Underwood" wire, patented in 1878. This brand of wire featured barbs that looked like tacks and came in either single tack or double tack patterns.

Said Lane, "I built this collection off of this wire."

One day Lane said he decided he wanted to donate his collection, but wasn't quite sure where would be a good place to find it a new home.

"All of my career with the NRCS I worked with A&M closely," he said. "I just got attached to these guys. I graduated from Southwest Texas State University and found that they had a pretty good collection already there. Several people expressed interest in it, but Wayne (Hamilton) expressed the greatest interest. I thought this collection would fit this atmosphere here better at A&M than anywhere else."