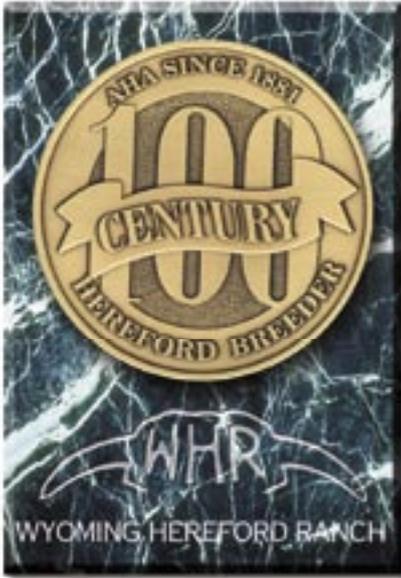


# Preserving Hallowed Ground

*The Wyoming Hereford Ranch remains the longest operating Hereford ranch in the country.*

by Corinne Patterson



Wyoming found its way into Hereford history in the early 1880s. Seven years before the territory would join the Union in statehood, Alexander Hamilton Swan had his eyes set on making his Wyoming range known for Hereford cattle. The Wyoming Hereford Association — later named and known today as the Wyoming Hereford Ranch (WHR) — is the nation's oldest continuing Hereford operation.

Forrest Bassford reports in his book *Wyoming Hereford Ranch, Century of Endurance 1883-1983*, “The first calf bred and registered by Wyoming Hereford Association arrived Jan. 2, 1883. She was Lady Clara 2D, No. 25638 in the then 18-month-old American Hereford Cattle Breeders Association registry.”

Today, J. Sloan and Anna Marie Hales own and care for the rich heritage brought to life nearly 125 years before.

Swan set aside thousands of acres dedicated to Hereford cattle. This area, now just a few miles east of Cheyenne, remains as the ranch headquarters.

Bringing Herefords to the West was Swan's test to see if this breed of cattle would survive in an environment much different than their native

England. Sloan says, “The experiment was exceedingly successful, and the Hereford cattle outperformed any other type of cattle back in the 1880s here in southeast Wyoming or the high plains.”

The Herefords truly thrived on the operation. But their success was in good hands.

“The people who did own the ranch had a devotion to the breed and a love of the breed,” says Gene Stillahn who spent a good part of his childhood on the ranch. “I think when Hales bought it they truly understood the heritage of the place, and they were really proud of being able to own the ranch.”

It was a colorful time in Wyoming history when WHR got its start. The opportunity for rail shipments and the growing West brought some of the wealthiest cattle barons of the time to the city of Cheyenne. In 1880 the “Cheyenne Club” was built by affluent cattlemen, and Swan was certainly among those who were members. Many of WHR owners assured this area would be known for its Herefords.

## Absentee owners

Bassford's book narrates the change of ownership in early days; all absentee landlords before the Hales moved to the ranch in the late 1970s. The ranch first changed hands in 1887, and by



Wyoming Hereford Ranch (WHR) current owners, Sloan and Anna Marie Hales, were recognized at the 100th National Western Stock Show for WHR's long-time participation. WHR has exhibited at more than 70 National Western Stock Shows and won champion carload 25 times.



WHR bulls in the early days.



WHR was a tour stop during the 1996 National Hereford Tour.

1890 Henry Altman and Dan McUlvan were owners. In 1916 the operation was named the Hereford Corporation of Wyoming under the ownership of Henry Parsons Crowell.

In 1921 the famed name — Wyoming Hereford Ranch — took heed with a bull called Prince Domino. Bassford wrote that in 1981, the American Hereford Association's Genealogical Listing of Hereford Sires devoted 79 of 100 pages to his descendants.

"He and his progeny drew thousands here, forging WHR to breed preeminence from the 1920s well past 1900s midpoint," Bassford noted.

Crowell, in an effort to preserve the ranch, signed the Indenture of Wyoming Hereford Ranch Trust near the year's end in 1938. Bassford reported trustees of George C. Lazear, Robert W. Lazear and Crowell. Soon, WHR would face its past.

"Dwarfism, drought, cattle price declines and Crowell Trust restrictions had WHR in a breeding-management-merchandising bind," Bassford wrote.

Thomas E. Leavy and G.C. Parker took joint ownership of the ranch in 1957, with Leavy taking full interest by 1958. At its height, the ranch was 60,000 acres and 2,500 registered Herefords. Bassford said that while Leavy had a love for Herefords and his family enjoyed WHR, no family member was prepared to take ranch responsibility. In 1967 the ranch was sold to Nielson Enterprises Inc.; Anna Marie, a Nielson herself.

### The early workers

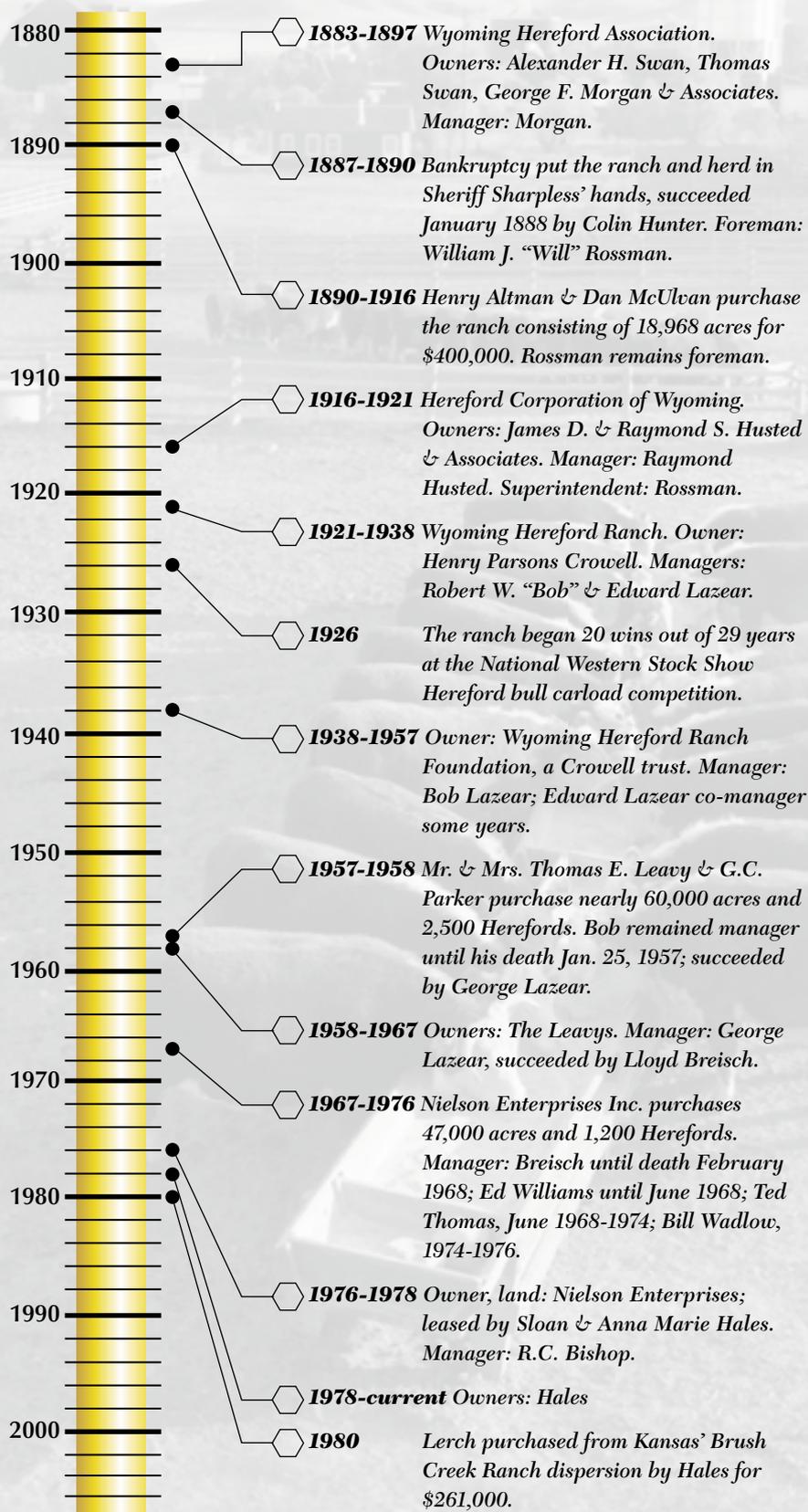
Arthur "Art" Stillahn, Gene's father, joined the WHR showbarn crew in 1965. Art and the showbarn crew took care of all the sale bulls and the range bulls. They were marketing approximately 450-550 bulls a year at the time. Gene was a young boy, in his early teens, and says he has many fond memories of growing up on the historical place.

"I don't know if there was anybody in the world who could love a Hereford cow more than my dad did," Gene recalls, "and I guess I kind of got the curse too. He loved being on that ranch. That was the best years of his life that I can remember."

Gene now owns his own Hereford herd and lives just 10 miles from WHR headquarters. He drives by the place each

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## TIMELINE



Source: Wyoming Hereford Ranch, Century of Endurance 1883-1983 by Forrest Bassford.

day on his way into town where he works for the state.

He remembers the pride that WHR workers had in their responsibilities. There was a farm crew who took care of haying, crops and maintenance. The cow crew took watch over the cows during calving and breeding. WHR also had a fulltime well man and a fulltime fencer. Gene says many had worked some 30 years at WHR.

"You could see their faces light up when they talked to somebody who wasn't from there or somebody in town. They would tell people that they worked for WHR. Everybody in Cheyenne knew what the WHR was," Gene recalls.

Nearly 30 homes filled with workers and their families were scattered across the ranch. Each home was settled near a "camp," and each camp was responsible for a number of cows, Gene says.

"It was kind of a little town when we moved there," he adds. "Before we moved there, they had had their own little grocery store on the ranch that somebody took care of and kept food in there."

Summer help was hired to assist with haying. "They put everything in small square bales and put it in stacks," Gene recalls. "They were running 1,200 mother cows at the time, all registered

Hereford cows. They could have probably run half again that many cows with the acreage that the place had at that point. It was 60,000 acres — 93 full sections of rangeland. Of course in this country it takes about 25 acres to run a cow."

A tribute to all who came before only exists in Gene's memory and perhaps those who knew what was called the No. 1 showbarn. Adorned on the outer wall of the warm room or coffee room were their marks on the place.

"The outside of that room had, I imagine, the initials and little sayings carved into that outer wall of probably most everybody who worked there," Gene remembers. "I loved to go down there when I was a kid and look at that wall and find different initials and different people who had carved their names in that wall." A fire took the building in the late 1980s. "I wish I could bring that back somehow. It was kind of to me like a shrine or memorial to those people who had worked there. It's gone now."

### The next century

Sloan and Anna Marie first leased the place in 1976 with the purchase of many of the Herefords. By 1978 the ranch sold in 14 parcels, and the couple had purchased a parcel called Campstool, and later the headquarters of the ranch.

They would soon bring their family to be raised in the country.

Sloan says one of the first things he and his wife wanted to do was preserve the improvements that were already on the ranch. "The owning of livestock was a new venture for both Anna Marie and me in the 1970s," Sloan says.

"Something from the outset as owners going back to the 1970s, we've taken the position that the Wyoming Hereford Ranch is very, very prominent in the history of Laramie County of southeast Wyoming where Cheyenne is located," he continues. "The ranch had vast improvements made over the years, which one could never justify today given the economics of putting improvements on a ranch."

The Hales made the commitment to maintain the existing buildings. But to take the ranch into the late 20th century, Sloan says he knew it would take more than preserving the past.

"In our early years of ranch ownership, the herd was in need of a dominant sire, something akin to a 'franchise quarterback,'" Sloan says. "In seeking the same, we bought the Lerch bull (BLR C L1 Domino 5109) in 1980 out of Kansas. The bull, which was nicknamed Lerch, became in the 1980s by far and away the most dominate horned Hereford sire not only in the United States, but probably in the world."

Concurrent with the Hales owning WHR, Sloan says expected progeny differences (EPDs) were being identified and began to play a major role in how breeding stock was selected.

"Obviously computers were available, and the information was gathered in the era like never before, nothing comparable to it," Sloan recalls. "So the idea of breeding animals was predicated on data rather than appearance or popularity or what people's impressions might be. Given one or two generations of bovine genetics, the progeny had performance data, which necessitated as breeders that we look for females that were more efficient and that indeed had calves that weighed a certain amount at birth, at weaning time and as yearlings.

"Fortunately though, the Lerch bull put us in the direction, which I think speaks for itself," he continues. "The

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## Don Ornduff Memorial Library

Sloan Hales, owner of the Wyoming Hereford Ranch (WHR) near Cheyenne, has made preserving Hereford history a favorite pastime. In doing so, he became acquainted with Donald Ornduff when visiting the American Royal and the American Hereford Association (AHA) Annual Meeting in Kansas City, Mo.

"In meeting with Don Ornduff, I became aware that he had an extensive library accumulated over the time that he was editor of the *American Hereford Journal*," Hales says. "Don also did the definitive work on the history of Hereford cattle in North America and published a book over 20 years ago on the history of Hereford cattle in America. I don't think that there is anything that even parallels that."

Hales made arrangements with Ornduff that upon his death he would acquire his library, which he did.

"The library is here in the WHR office, except this is the year that I am finally putting in the book cases and the display cabinet to feature what I am going to refer to as the Don Ornduff Memorial Library," Hales says. "And among Hereford people, as I say the name Ornduff, it is legendary. He spent his lifetime — his adult life — with the American Hereford Association. His tenure as editor approached 40 years. He was a wonderful gentleman, a gifted writer, one who was really in the center of Hereford history for the 20th century at least."

As with all areas of the WHR, this library will be open to the public and something Hales hopes people will enjoy well into the future.

WHR hosted two All-American Junior Hereford Expos (JHE). (top photo) Sloan Hales along with his family welcomes guests to the 1996 JHE. (bottom left) The Hales family pictured at the 1983 JHE. (bottom right) An aerial photo of the 1983 JHE.



PHOTO BY DOUG PUTNAM

progeny of Lerch, even though it's been 25 years after his entry here to WHR, is still reflected in the Hereford industry throughout America."

Just as Swan had tested before, Sloan says this area of the country is ideal for Hereford cattle, and for good reason Herefords have grazed the land for so many years.

"The grass has the right substance to cause the cattle to flourish. The weather, even though it's extreme, Hereford cattle with their thicker hide and good hair covering seem to tolerate even the coldest of temperatures here." Sloan says. "I think it's mixing the topography, the geography of the land itself in southeast Wyoming to a specific cattle composition and the two combine simply to make for a successful end product."

### Open to the public

Keeping with the heritage that made WHR known around the country, Sloan and Anna Marie have opened the historical ranch to the public for touring. This practice was started many years before.

"The ranch has always been on the Cheyenne Tour Guide," Gene points out. He recalls the swarms of people who would come to tour the WHR even back in the 1960s. He remembers counting some 30 cars on the ranch at one time during Cheyenne Frontier Days. "The guys who worked on the ranch full time didn't have time to stand there and talk

to people," Gene says. So he would end up narrating about the operation and entertaining visitors so that the work crew could tend to the livestock.

Sloan says his six children also took on the role of tour guide while they were at the ranch. His daughter, Patricia, took special interest in the place. "Out of six children, there's perhaps one who is truly immersed herself in wanting to expand on her appreciation and understanding of agriculture and livestock specifically."

The open door policy the Hales have taken still welcomes many visitors. "We've kind of designed it today where people can come and pick up their own little walking tour schematic map and envision what the ranch represents today, as well as how it existed over many decades of time," Sloan says.

In 1983 and again 1996 the WHR hosted the All-American Junior Hereford Expo (JHE). Hosting this youth-focused event, Sloan says, has been a highlight of ranch ownership. There were several thousand people who came to the ranch during the course of the five-day event.

The year 1996 marked another special memory in Hales' ownership. In August the ranch hosted a stop on the World Hereford Tour. The tour brought Hereford breeders and enthusiasts from 20 nations.

Today, the massive barns at WHR can be rented for a nominal fee. Many people host weddings, receptions, meetings and other social events in the barns.

While it's not the same as the old-timers' carvings in the wood wall, Gene still enjoys seeing who has come to visit the ranch and who has left their marks on the guestbook located in the office. "It's enjoyable to go back and see where people come from and how far they came," Gene says. "I noticed the other day that somebody signed the guestbook in Japanese."

### Herefords will remain

Outside of ranch ownership, Sloan followed

in his father's footsteps in the medical field. Sloan was first a surgeon, but did a second residency and has maintained his anesthesiology practice in Cheyenne. "Even though my background certainly isn't directly related to people involved in agriculture, I've always regarded people in agriculture as people who are honest, who are straight forward, who have a tremendous work ethic," Sloan says.

Most of the bulls are sold today by way of private treaty. Sloan is working to improve upon his herd and has offered Gene the opportunity to assist in this endeavor. "The registered Hereford cattle are still the focus of what we do today, and we hope that that will continue until Anna Marie and I no longer exist," Sloan says.

Gene says the Hales have made their home on the place and he feels certain that the ranch will continue producing Herefords. And, Gene adds, "it's certainly a personal pleasure to take a small part in working with Sloan to preserve the ranch's future."

"I just remember a lot of the guys, and they influence me today," Gene says. "Probably one of the biggest reasons why I'm trying to help Sloan today is because I remember those guys and how proud they were to work there. ... There are people who have worked there, and there's still a piece of them there — my dad included. He really loved that place. That part of my life was pretty cool. I will always remember it." HW

