

# A Texas-Sized Legacy



*A rich history accompanies Pronger Bros. to more than 100 years in the Hereford business.*



Pronger Bros. was recognized as a Century Breeder during the 2004 AHA Annual Meeting. Pictured at the AHA headquarters the night prior to the presentation (seated l to r) are: Jimmie, Alfred and Jana Pronger. Back row (l to r) are: Craig Huffhines, AHA executive vice president; Jill Pronger Killian; Jeff, David and Fred Pronger; and Dale Venhuizen, 2004 AHA president.

Founded by A.E. (Alfred Edward) and P.J. (Perry Jones) Pronger in 1904, Pronger Bros. made an early impression on the Hereford breed. Today, Pronger Bros. is managed by one of A.E.'s sons, A.E. (Alfred) Pronger Jr., and Alfred's son, A.E. (Fred) Pronger III.

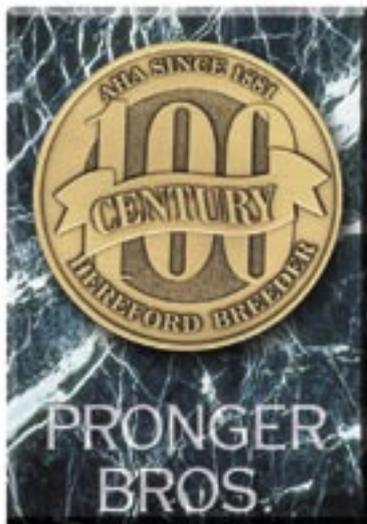
In its prime, around 1930, Pronger Bros. was recording more than 600 calves each year and was ranked the fourth largest herd of registered Herefords in the U.S.

## **In the beginning**

A.E. and P.J. immigrated with their family to Florida from England in 1886. In 1890 the two young men left their parents' home and went to find work on their own. They spent a few years in Tampa, Fla., where P.J. found a job as a hotel clerk and A.E. worked at a furniture store. Eventually the brothers made their way to Wichita Falls, Texas. There they started managing cattle for a local rancher, Mr. Frieberg, with aspirations of owning their own land and cattle.

After the brothers successfully wintered 100 yearling steers on 1,000 acres near Beaver Creek, Frieberg made them a special offer.

Frieberg realized that they needed capital and an investor to help get them started. With that in mind, the rancher took A.E. and P.J. down to the bank, where he was a director, and told the cashier to accept any checks signed Pronger Bros. The cashier asked for a limit and was told by Frieberg, "I know nothing about any limit, but if I have it in the bank, you pay it," tells Alfred.



A Texas-sized legacy continues near Stratford. Pronger Bros., one of the first registered Hereford herds in the Texas Panhandle, is still in business today. The Pronger family says it may very well be the oldest Hereford ranch in the state, and possibly the country, that is still in the same place, operated by the same family and under the same ranch name.



A snapshot of the Pronger Bros. headquarters in 1916.

Alfred says this is how the Pronger brothers learned to sign checks. “They never signed a check by their individual names, always Pronger Brothers — up until the day they died.

The Pronger brothers, with the financial backing of Frieberg, started raising cattle and leasing land.

“They quickly turned a profit,” says Alfred. “During this time they lived in a shack on Beaver Creek, owned by Frieberg.”

In 1903 the brothers had saved enough money that they thought

they could purchase their own land. With limited land available in Wichita County, they had to look elsewhere. They heard that the Texas railroad was selling “homeseeker” tickets at greatly reduced prices. These tickets allowed riders to stop at any point and investigate land and prices. The brothers decided this would give them the opportunity to explore options and possibly purchase cheap land in West Texas.

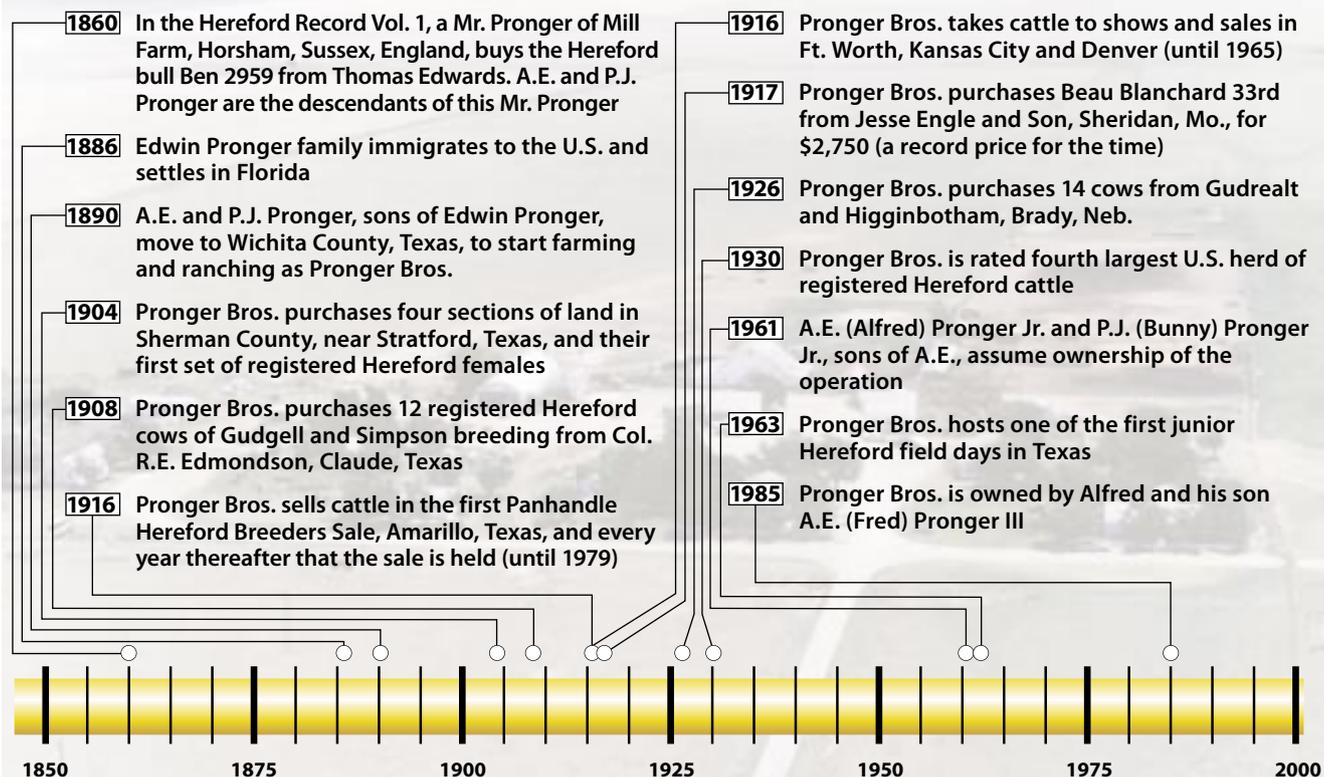
Alfred says they were tempted to buy land at several stops along

the way. “Their tickets ran out in Dallam County. But, when they got off the train they were disappointed by the sandy soil. Other travelers on the train had mentioned to the two brothers that Sherman County was ‘tighter ground and good grass country,’ so they rented a horse and buggy and went on to Stratford, the Sherman County seat.”

The brothers were obviously impressed. In Stratford they purchased four sections of land for

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## TIMELINE





In 1963 Pronger Bros. hosted a field day at the ranch. Hereford juniors had the opportunity to participate in a judging contest, fitting demonstration and speech contest.



Golden Axe was a heavily used sire at Pronger Bros. in the '70s. He was purchased from Pied Piper Farms, Hamlin, Texas.

\$3,000. The brothers settled their affairs in Wichita Falls, moved and purchased a modest set of registered Hereford heifers.

The brothers' first purchase of notable bloodlines was in 1908. They bought 12 registered Hereford cows of Gudgell and Simpson breeding from Col. R.E. Edmondson, located near Claude, Texas. They purchased the cattle for \$100 each.

"The story goes that when the cattle arrived in Stratford on the train, many of the local farmers and townspeople came to see the expensive cattle be unloaded," says Fred. "Several of the farmers commented that 'no cow is worth \$100' and that these two foolish Englishmen wouldn't last. But, here we are a century later."

These cows laid the foundation for the Pronger's registered herd of Hereford cattle. In addition, the

bloodline of Beau Blanchard has made significant contributions to the Pronger herd.

"Pronger Bros. was one of the first herds in Texas to recognize the merits of Beau Blanchard, a bull bred by Gudgell and Simpson," says Alfred. "Pronger Bros. purchased Beau Blanchard 33rd in 1917."

Pronger Bros. has used many sons and grandsons of Beau Blanchard. Alfred notes that back then the Beau Blanchard bloodline was superior to everything else. In 1926 Pronger Bros. acquired 14 cows from Gudrealt and Higginbotham near Brady, Neb., including 10 daughters of Beau Randolph, another grand champion bull bred by Gudgell and Simpson.

### The partnership

The two brothers were not just business partners, but best friends.

"My dad, A.E., married my mother, Ivie Pinkerton, in Wichita Falls in August of 1905, but Uncle Perce lived with us," says Alfred. "My parents had five children — Dorothy (Polly), Percy Jr. (Bunny), Beatrice (Penny), Doris (Tottie) and me. I was the youngest boy. My sister, Tottie, is still alive and lives in Stratford."

At some time each of the five children or their descendants have been involved in the Hereford

business. Polly and her husband, Elmer Summerour, started a Hereford operation with the wedding gift of a registered Hereford heifer from her father and uncle.

Polly and Elmer's children continue to operate Summerour Hereford Ranch near Dalhart, Texas.

Friends said that wherever one of the Pronger brothers went, the other would be there within six months. Their deaths occurred just six weeks apart in 1961.

The three daughters decided to take their inheritance out of the Pronger Bros. operation. Alfred and Bunny continued the operation with their inheritance as well as land and cattle they had acquired while working for their father and uncle. They added more land as they could and continued their partnership until after the deaths of Bunny in 1964 and his wife, Vera, in 1979.

Fred returned to the ranch after receiving his degree from Texas A&M in 1974 and started building up a herd of cattle. In 1985 he added his cattle, as well as owned and leased land, to the family operation.

### Supporting the industry

"Pronger Bros. always had a good reputation as solid, dependable people," says Bud Snidow, former AHA employee and Hereford historian. "They always had Herefords — nothing else."

For that reason, Pronger Bros. played a huge part in developing interest in Hereford cattle in West Texas and western Oklahoma. In 1916 the ranch sold cattle at the first Panhandle Hereford Breeders Sale in Amarillo, Texas.

"They consigned cattle to the Panhandle Hereford Breeders Sale every year until it was discontinued in the late '70s," says Alfred. "They also were members and sold cattle in several other regional association sales in the area."

"Dad and Uncle Perce would sell cattle by the carload and had great success developing a network of repeat bull and heifer buyers located in the Texas and Oklahoma panhandles, as well

as northeastern New Mexico, southeastern Colorado and southwestern Kansas,” says Alfred.

In 1955 A.E. and P.J. were recognized as honorary members of the Texas Hereford Association (THA). Alfred went on to receive that honor as well in 1994.

“Pronger Bros. have been loyal members of the Texas Hereford Association since day one,” says Jack Chastain, THA executive secretary.

In the 1940s Pronger Bros. started shipping bulls across the border to Chihuahua, Mexico, to the Matias Mesta Ranch. Matias Mesta was the president of the Mexican Cattlemen’s Association. Pronger Bros. sold bulls to three generations of the Mesta family. The Mesta family in turn brought dozens of other Mexican ranchers to buy bulls from Pronger Bros.

In addition, a previous bull buyer, John Burns, helped open the door to another bull buyer in Mexico.

“I first met John Burns when he was head of the animal science department at Texas A&M,” recalls Alfred. “He went on to become the manager of the 6666 Ranch and purchased bulls from us for a number of years.”

Burns brought the owners of the San Geronimo Ranch, Coahuila, Mexico, to Pronger Bros. in 1953. They were regular bull customers until 2003 — when the first case of BSE in the U.S. was confirmed and the border was closed.

“In the early years, they would purchase between 40 to 50 bulls a year,” says Alfred. “Then the Mexican government put up some restrictions and their cattle numbers dropped. The last few years they were only buying 10 to 20 bulls each year, but they always came back to us.”

The current owners of Pronger Bros. credit this repeat bull business to the ability of their bulls to handle tough terrain.

“Our bulls can handle the tough, arid conditions of places like Coahuila, Chihuahua,

Sonora, New Mexico, Nevada and Arizona,” says Fred.

Another unique aspect of Pronger Bros. was the ability of the ranch to be self-sufficient. In 1964 a pellet mill was added to their feed mill.

“Pronger Bros. made their own range cubes from 1964 until 2002 when drought conditions forced the sale of enough cattle to make operation of the pellet mill uneconomical,” says Fred. “The pellet mill helped keep expenses down as we could feed the grain that we grew to our own cattle.”

Like many other ranches in the Texas Panhandle, Pronger Bros. is at the mercy of Mother Nature these days. With a six-year drought, the availability of grass weighs heavy on herd size.

“Right now we have 140 cows, but just five to 10 years ago we had nearly 400,” says Fred.

Pronger cattle are bred to be moderately framed, but to have enough size to survive on the range. The past few years, bulls have been marketed mainly in central Texas. Most females and steers are sold at the local sale barn or to local farmers and ranchers.

### The future

Alfred currently resides on the ranch in a house at the same location as the original Pronger house. His wife of 59 years, Jimmie, passed away in October 2006. They had five children — Jana, Fred, Jeff, David and Jill Pronger Killian.



Katie Killian is currently the THA Sweetheart.

Jana lives in Borger, Texas. She is a retired county Extension agent.

Fred and his wife, Marsha, live next door to Alfred and raised their children, Janell and Patrick, on the ranch. Both children are now grown and married. Janell and her husband, Jason Miller, have started the next generation of the family with their son, Landry.

Jeff lives on the ranch and helps with day-to-day operations.

David and his wife, Karen, and children — Caroline and Brent — live in Burseson, Texas.

Of the five children, Jill is the most recent to return to the ranch and is currently the most active in Hereford activities. Jill and husband, John, have four children — Katie, Kavan, Blaine and Bryce. Katie is currently the THA Sweetheart.

“We returned to the ranch because we want to be a part of its future,” says Jill. “We also want our kids involved in raising Hereford cattle.”

Alfred says he has enjoyed the cattleman’s way of life. “I’ve raised Herefords all of my life. It means a lot to me to have the ranch continue and to see everyone

involved in raising Hereford cattle. As far as I’m concerned this breed is the best breed.”

There is no doubt that this Texas-sized legacy will live on. **HW**



Alfred (far left) and son Fred currently manage Pronger Bros. With a six-year drought, the availability of grass has caused them to slowly cut herd size.