



A Lesson in

# American History, Community Influence, Persistence

*Take another look. There's far more to Swenson Land and Cattle Co. than meets the eye.*

by *Teresa Oe*



Pictured in front (l to r) are: Bruce B. Swenson, Dallas; Mrs. Bruce B. Swenson (Nancy), Dallas; and Randolphe P. (Perry) Swenson, Key Largo, Fla. In the back row (l to r) are: Bruce M. (Smokey) Swenson, Dallas; Nancy S. (Swenson) Caldwell, Dallas; Christopher Swenson, Montclair, N.J.; Mrs. Stephen (Carla) Swenson, Dallas; Stephen (Steve) Swenson, Dallas; Merritt Swenson, San Antonio; Eric Swenson, Melbourne Beach, Fla.; Carroll Swenson-Roberts (Mrs. Truett Roberts), Dallas; Peter Swenson, Key Largo, Fla.; Sara Roberts, Dallas; Truett Roberts, Dallas; and Dr. Randolphe P. (Randy) Swenson Jr., Englewood, Colo. The painting in the background is of Svante Magnus Swenson, who purchased the initial land holdings for what later became Swenson Land and Cattle Co.

If you have a liking for cowboy history, a trip to West Texas just might be in order. Here exist some of the most historical ranches in the countryside. Plan for a stop in Stamford, where the family-owned Swenson Land and Cattle Co. Inc. makes history come alive. This Hereford Century Breeder ranch reveals a magnificent account of American history, community influence and persistence in the face of challenge.

## More than a ranch

It's no coincidence that Swenson Street is a main road in Stamford or that the Swenson Land and Cattle Co. headquarters is located on the town square. "The town owes its existence to this family," says Gary Decker, a 20-plus-year resident of Stamford.

Swenson roots in Texas long outdate the ranch itself, which was founded in 1882. Svante Magnus (S.M.) Swenson emigrated from Sweden to the U.S. in 1836. He first moved to Texas in '38, starting his own mercantile business in Richmond. He then worked in Austin as a merchant and banker.

Among his merchandise were Colt revolvers, which he sold to the Texas Navy. In 1854, S.M. purchased large land tracts in the rolling plains of West Texas. He saw potential in this barren wilderness when others did not.

Bruce B. Swenson, great-grandson to S.M. and former chairman of the ranch, explains that S.M. was unable



John Selmon (Scandalous John), longtime foreman at the Flat Top Ranch, cuts a steer away from the herd. His son Tony says that John got his nickname when a horse threw him to the ground. "That horse sure does buck scandalous," John said. The cowboys got a kick out of this and nicknamed him Scandalous John.



A 2M2 cowboy catches his mount for the day. At one time, the ranch owned more than 600 saddle horses.



The chuck wagon was the most valued ranch asset and the cook the most respected man of the operation. The chuck wagon carried not only food but also tents and bedding for the cowboys during roundups, brandings and cattle drives. Facing the camera in this chuck wagon picture is A.J. Swenson, who served as ranch manager from 1922-46.

to do much with the land himself as his political beliefs were contradictory to the Texas majority. He was a good friend to politician and soldier Sam Houston and closely associated with his effort to keep Texas in the Union prior to the Civil War. After the war, S.M. moved his family to New York when he found his life threatened because of his anti-secessionist position.

S.M. later leased the southern lands to his sons, Eric Pierson (E.P.) and Swen Albin (S.A.), to begin a ranching operation. Swenson Bros. partnership was formed in 1882 with the “fencing in” of Swenson land.

Knowing the potential the railroad could bring to the ranch and the area, S.M. offered land lots to the Texas Central Railroad in exchange for an extension of the rail line to the ranch. These lots became the town of Stamford, named after the railroad company president and established in 1900.

When the railroad reached Stamford, oil mills and cotton gins were among the entities of commerce that developed. S.M. spurred this economic development in what was once unsettled, unvalued territory.

### Herd development and changes

E.P. and S.A. got their start in the ranching business with the management help of cowboys Alfred Dyer and Joe Ericson. According to “The Swenson Saga and the SMS Ranches” by Mary Whatley Clarke, “The first herd consisted of 1,800 good grade Shorthorns and 180 Indiana pure crossbred Hereford-Shorthorn cows. Registered Hereford bulls were bought out of the Fowler and Van Natta herds from Indiana.”

The Shorthorn influence had diminished by the 1940s, and only Herefords were raised on the ranch for 30-some years. From the beginning, Swenson cattle wore the **ZMZ** (S.M. Swenson) brand that is still used today and carries a U.S. patent.

Swenson Bros. truly got its start in the registered Hereford business with ranch manager



**ZMZ** registered bulls such as these were bred to purebred Hereford cows to produce sires for the ranch's commercial cow herd.

Frank Hastings. Prior to his hiring in 1902, Frank managed the breeding and sale of Hereford cattle at the well-known Armour operation of Kansas City. In 1906 Swenson Bros. purchased 100 registered Hereford heifers from Armour and Co. These heifers were bred to Hereford bulls, creating foundation stock for the **ZMZ** purebred bull herd.

Frank was far ahead of his time in marketing strategy, as he developed a mail-order system for selling **ZMZ** registered cattle to operations in the Midwest. He had booklets made that showed the ranch and cattle, and mailed them out each year to prospective customers. From these, folks with good grazing lands would place their annual orders.

The registered cattle were also promoted at national carload shows across the country. **ZMZ** yearling heifer loads gained much fame after decades of success. The ranch headquarters building is adorned with trophies dating back to 1918 that serve as proof of the quality registered cattle produced at Swenson Land and Cattle Co. Still, the ranch's major focus throughout time has been the commercial sector.

W.G. (Bill) Swenson, ranch co-manager from 1946-68, explained in the July 1962 *Hereford Journal* the purpose and process behind Swenson operations: “Since the main objective of **ZMZ** ranches is to produce high-quality feeder calves and yearlings, we try to buy the best Hereford bulls we can find for our registered Hereford herd, which consists of about 200 mother cows. Then we take the best bulls out of this herd and use them in our purebred unregistered Hereford herd,

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## Timeline



- 1836** – S.M. Swenson emigrates from Sweden to the U.S.
- 1838** – S.M. moves to Texas.
- 1854** – S.M. purchases land in the rolling plains of West Texas.
- 1865** – S.M. moves his family to New York.
- 1882** – S.M.'s sons, E.P. and S.A., form Swenson Bros. partnership to define their cattle business on the West Texas lands.
- 1900** – The town of Stamford is established.
- 1902** – Frank Hastings is hired as ranch manager, serving until 1922.
- 1906** – Swenson Bros. purchases 100 registered Hereford heifers from Armour and Co. Registered Hereford bulls were bought from the Fowler and Van Natta herds before this time.
- 1922** – A.J. Swenson is hired as ranch manager, serving until 1946.
- 1926** – Swensons incorporate their ranching enterprises — except for the Spur Ranch — under the name Swenson Land and Cattle Co. Inc.
- 1930** – Swenson Land and Cattle Co. initiates the Texas Cowboy Reunion.
- 1940** – Around this time, an intense mesquite eradication program is started on the ranch.
- 1946** – Bill and Swede Swenson are hired as ranch co-managers, serving until their deaths in 1968 and 1972, respectively.
- 1972** – Gene and Carl Swenson are hired as ranch co-managers, serving until 1978.
- 1978** – The ranch is divided into four separate family-owned entities. Gary Mathis is hired to manage the part of the ranch that remains today, then named Swen R. Swenson Cattle Co. Inc.
- 1998** – Swen R. Swenson Cattle Co. is restored to its original name, Swenson Land and Cattle Co.
- 2005** – Dennis Braden is hired as general manager of the ranch.



This early-day picture was taken at the pens of the Throckmorton Ranch after a roundup. The calves are about to be sorted off from their mothers and most of them shipped in railcars to buyers in the Midwest. Thanks to S.M. Swenson's "land for rail" exchange with the Texas Central Railroad, a shipping point is nearby in Stamford.



consisting of about 1,000 cows. Then we take the best bulls produced in this herd and use them on our commercial Hereford cow herd.”

Between the registered, purebred and large commercial herds, 16,000 Hereford cows were producing on the ranch by the early 70s. Prince Domino blood was strong in the herds' lineage. Later in the decade, Angus genetics were incorporated into the commercial herd to take advantage of heterosis. And then other breeds were introduced to find the best terminal cross with baldie females.

### The land and its challenges

In addition to the land that S.M. originally purchased, E.P. and S.A. bought more land to use for ranching purposes and to sell for profit. By the early 1900s the Swenson land holding had grown to almost 500,000 acres, including six ranch properties: Eilerslie, Ericdale, Flat Top, Spur, Throckmorton and Tongue River. Ericdale was sold in its entirety by 1908 to a Swedish colonist community. Eilerslie was sold in 1926, and all but 60,000 acres of the Spur Ranch were sold by 1911. The rest of the Spur was sold in 1971.

In 1926, Swensons incorporated the ranching enterprises — except for the Spur Ranch — under the name Swenson Land and Cattle Co. Inc. The Spur was held under

a different entity called the Spur Syndicate. The ranch corporation has remained family-owned to this day and was managed by a family member, or members, for many years.

It must be known that these managers have had their work cut out for them. Ranching in West Texas does not come without its fair share of challenges. Early on, ranches in the area were plagued with prairie dogs that ate the grass and tore up the ground. The prairie dog problem was eventually controlled with different forms of poison.

Prairie dogs eat mesquite seedlings, so with their absence, the mesquite trees spread like wildfire, competing with grasses for much-needed moisture in a frequently drought-stricken area.

Progressive in land management, Swenson Land and Cattle Co. began a mesquite eradication program in the early 1940s to restore the lands' productivity. At the time, A.J. Swenson, S.M.'s nephew, was managing the ranch.

Because of the mesquite trees' ability to regenerate buds below ground level, mesquite population was, and still is, hard to control. Many forms of eradication were attempted and abandoned in favor of mechanical removal. The ranch organized an entire mesquite eradication department. Employees operated crawler-type tractors — “dozers” — equipped with tree-dozing and root-cutting apparatuses. Dennis Braden, current general manager of the ranch, says story has it that at one time 27 dozers ran 24 hours a day, seven days a week. Much progress was made with concentrated efforts, and today only one dozer is used to combat severe reinvasion.

Dennis also says that water developments have been a management priority. Wells have been drilled and windmills have

been erected where underground water allows. Where this isn't possible, artificial ponds have been created by constructing dams across ravines, draws and creeks. Miles of underground pipeline have been laid to transport water where necessary.

These water developments, along with strategic fencing, have facilitated rotational grazing systems that promote the health of native forage species, increasing overall range health and carrying capacity.

### Management progression and ranch division

Almost as complex as land management in West Texas is the management history of Swenson Land and Cattle Co. Alfred and Joe helped E.P. and S.A. in early times, although years of service and formal titles are not available. Frank managed the ranch from 1902-22 before family members assumed management for a number of years. A.J. served as manager from 1922-46. Then his sons, Bill and A.M.G. (Swede) took the reins. Bill passed on in 1968, and Swede continued in management until his death in 1972. At that time, Gene Swenson, Bill's son, and Carl Swenson, Bill's nephew, became co-managers.

In 1978 the ranch was divided into four separate family-owned corporations. The part that exists today as Swenson Land and Cattle Co. changed its name temporarily to Swen R. Swenson Cattle Co. Inc. in recognition of a former family ranch owner who was E.P.'s son. The name was then switched back in 1998 in favor of the more historical label.

Swen R. Swenson Cattle Co. kept the ~~ZMZ~~ brand and hired Gary Mathis, who had been assistant manager to Gene and Carl, as ranch manager. Gary served in this capacity until 2005, at which time Dennis became general manager. Gary was the first non-family manager since 1922.

### Current operations

After the division, Swenson Land and Cattle Co. was reduced to about 54,000 acres made up of 40,000 acres at Flat Top Ranch and 14,000 acres of the original Throckmorton Ranch. The operation is now home to 180 registered Herefords that are managed as part of the larger commercial herd consisting of 1,500 Hereford, Angus and baldie cows.

The cattle are expected to make use



Hereford cattle have been a mainstay in the ~~ZMZ~~ program for so many years because of their ability to perform in the less than ideal conditions of West Texas.

of standing forage year-round and are provided protein supplement only as needed in the winter. Hay is rarely fed. The ranch has spring- and fall-calving seasons, but Dennis plans to move to a spring-only system, calving heifers before cows. Calves are preconditioned using the SelectVAC® program, weaned at seven months and sold on Superior Livestock Auction. Dennis brought the video marketing idea to the ranch, which has proven profitable.

Holding with Swenson tradition, Dennis is implementing several land and water improvements. The major land management concern is now prickly pear cactus. "I figure we can reclaim 40% of our acreage," Dennis says of reducing the cactus problem. This year he has had 4,000 acres of pasture sprayed by helicopter and 1,200 acres spring-burned and then sprayed. Another 800 acres were burned last summer. Dennis says these efforts to get rid of the cactus appear to be working, although a lot of treatment is yet to be done. Water development projects also continue, with five to six miles of pipeline laid already this year.

Ranching isn't the only enterprise on Swenson lands. Wheat farming and hunting are among other sources of income. Several oil wells have been drilled on the property, and recently, Swensons signed an agreement to start a wind farm at Throckmorton.

One of Dennis' main focuses is to rebuild the ranch's horse program. At one time, more than 600 horses were in the **ZMZ** remuda, a group of saddle horses from which ranch hands chose their mounts each day. Horse numbers were reduced significantly on the ranch over time, but Dennis recently made several purchases from reputable horse breeders to bring the **ZMZ** program back to life. Forty-one brood mares are now producing on the ranch, and Dennis plans to market ranch-broke geldings in the future.

Assisting with ranch operations are a staff of 14 including one camp man at each of the three ranches, a farm crew of three, maintenance crew of three and five cowboys. A family board of directors oversees Swenson Land and Cattle Co. including Bruce B.'s wife, Nancy, Dallas; and their children Stephen (Steve), Dallas; Bruce M. (Smokey), Dallas; Christopher, Montclair, N.J.; and Carroll Swenson-Roberts, Dallas. Bruce B.'s brother Randolph P. (Perry), Key Largo, Fla., is also on

the board along with his sons Dr. Randolph P. Jr. (Randy), Englewood, Colo., and Peter, Key Largo, Fla. Soon to join the board is Perry's son Eric, Melbourne Beach, Fla., as well as Bruce B.'s daughters Merritt, San Antonio, and Nancy S. (Swenson) Caldwell, Dallas. John Merrill, Ft. Worth, Texas, serves as an advisory director.

Although the family board members don't live on the ranch, they consult with each other and Dennis on major Swenson Land and Cattle Co. decisions. Steve is chairman of the board and lives 3½ hours east of the ranch. He talks with Dennis daily and visits the ranch frequently.

"We've been fortunate to have great managers," Steve says. He also says the reason that Herefords have remained at Swenson Land and Cattle Co. for so many years is because they perform well in the less than ideal conditions of West Texas' rolling plains.

### Continuing community influence

The history and development of the Swenson ranch itself is awesome, but the contributions made to the Stamford area tell an equally impressive story, one of continuous commitment to community. Swenson land that was not given to the railroad or used for family purposes has been donated to develop services and events in Stamford. For example, the family gave land and money to build churches and the original McMurry University. Most known today, however, is the family's initiation in 1930 of the world's largest amateur rodeo, the Texas Cowboy Reunion.

The reunion, held on Swenson land, brought spirit to the area in the height of the Depression. Since then it has brought masses of people to Stamford each summer to rope, ride and relish the spirit of "cowboying." There were years when nearly 150,000 people flooded the small town (population approximately 3,500) including famous national figures like Will Rogers and George W. Bush, who attended when he was governor of Texas. Although the event is much smaller today, thousands of people still take part.

The Texas Cowboy Reunion seems to represent the good of the Swenson family to many folks including Bob Moorhouse, manager of Pitchfork Ranch in Guthrie, Texas. "The



Dennis Braden joined Swenson Land and Cattle Co. as manager in Sept. 2005. The sign he's leaning on in front of the headquarters briefly describes the ranch's history.

Swensons are very respected," he says, looking up at two panoramic pictures of the reunion that decorate his ranch office. "They are good people, with a good reputation."

Tony Selmon, retired Stamford medical doctor, agrees. Tony's father, John, was a longtime foreman at Flat Top, so Tony spent his youth working the ranch as a cowboy. He had an interest in medical school but knew cowboy wages wouldn't cover tuition. So A.J. loaned him money to pay for the start of his college education. He returned to Stamford to serve as a doctor for more than 35 years.

Tony's service to the community was huge and might not have come to fruition without A.J.'s help. "Swensons had a lot of influence in my life," he says.

Gary Decker adds that the family still maintains a "vital connection" to Stamford, although none are living on the ranch. He also commends Dennis for his contributions in the short time he's been in the community. Gary and Dennis serve together on the Stamford Main Street Committee, working to reclaim the historical greatness of the town. It is Dennis' "vision," Gary says, that makes him a valued Stamford citizen and Swenson Land and Cattle Co. manager. Of the ranch's people altogether, he says, "They're a good partner to have in the community." **HW**



Still in use today, the Swenson Land and Cattle Co. headquarters building, originally built in 1927, is located on the town square in Stamford, Texas.