



# Lasting Legacy

**Five generations of the Smathers family have cared for their Texas Hill Country ranch and their century-old Hereford herd.**

by *Katie Maupin Miller*

**T**welve miles west of Llano, Texas, off State Highway 71, you'll find a 500-acre ranch. Amid its rolling Texas hills and natural rock formations, you'll find a herd of registered Herefords seeking shelter under mature oak trees as they have for the last century. Perhaps, the only thing more constant than some red-white-faced cows grazing on this Hill Country haven is the family who cares for them.

What's their secret?

"It kind of sounds simplistic, but that never-give-up mentality. There are so many challenges with weather and market fluctuations. These make ranching a difficult profession," current owner Rick Smathers says. "My father would just ride that tide and never give up. We might have to sell some for survival, but we never sold out."

Smathers Hereford Ranch has now ridden that tide for five generations. Owners, Rick and his wife, Jodye, are raising both Hereford cattle and the fifth generation of Smathers — 11-year-old Slade — on their acreage. Like Rick's father and his father's father, all the way back to his great-grandfather, Rick will ensure the legacy of their family name, their Hereford cattle and their ranch endures.

Ranch families must withstand a lot over 100 years — good times, bad times, happy times and sad times — yet, the Smathers family has stayed steadfast in their commitment to their piece of Hill Country. They've weathered every storm and even those years when they've desperately prayed for a storm to bring rain.

## **Family legacy**

Over the past 135 years, the ranch has passed from father to son for five generations.

James Jefferson (J.J.) Smathers purchased his first patch of Llano County, Texas, dirt in 1886, shortly

after he wed Harriet Olenza Spinks. The couple built their home and their family. Together, they had seven children: James Fields, Felton, Pearl, Iva, Velma, Sallie and Forrest. Many of their children went on to do great things. James Fields Smathers invented the electric typewriter. Felton Smathers bred Royal King, the American Quarter Horse Association Hall of Fame stallion and father of the modern-day cutting horse industry. And Forrest acquired his father's property in 1936. There, he and his wife, Ella Mae, raised their own seven children, along with cotton, peanuts, goats, pecans and Hereford cattle.

Forrest and Ella Mae's children were all deeded a portion of their property in 1980. Son

Charles Winfred "PeeWee" continued the Smathers Hereford Ranch tradition of raising cows and raising kids — Rick and Renee Smathers. During this time, PeeWee took extra care of the family's acreage and focused on improving its pastures. In 2010, he deeded a portion of his property to his

son, Rick, and the father-son duo farmed side-by-side until PeeWee passed in 2017. Rick now runs cattle with his young son, Slade, as he passes down generations of knowledge garnered from running Hereford cattle in the Hill Country.

Today, the Smathers Hereford Ranch boasts highly managed, improved grasses, cultivated fields and rotational cell-grazing, maximizing herd production and capacity — a far cry from the 500 acres of raw pastureland it once was. Like the land itself, the bald-faced cattle have also evolved. Initially, Smathers Hereford Ranch was a commercially centric herd, which marketed its cattle to local producers through on-farm production sales. Today, the family uses AI and embryo transfer to produce registered Hereford cattle aimed at the showing, much to the delight of fifth-generation heir and junior showman Slade Smathers.



## Staying power

Maintaining a family ranch for more than 100 years means not only being open to change, but also having grit and staying power, which is hard to find in today's world. That way of thinking was passed down to Rick from his father, who got it from his father before.

Each generation of Smathers faced its own set of challenges, from droughts to floods and even the Great Depression. During the Great Depression, the Smathers family did everything to make enough



The James Jefferson (J.J.) Smathers family gathers at their home. Pictured from left to right: (on porch) Iva, Sallie, Felton, James Jefferson, Harriet Olenza Spinks Smathers and Aunt Nancy Spinks; (in front of porch) Velma, Forrest, Fields and Pearl Smathers.



J.J. Smathers was the patriarch of the five generations of Smathers who have lived and worked on the century ranch.



J.J. Smathers' brand.

extra money to keep the ranch. They sold milk and butter in Llano, sewed and mended garments and even planted a 10-acre patch of peanuts. Once the peanuts were harvested, the family turned hogs out on the pasture to clean up the vines before harvesting the pigs and curing the meat.

This resourcefulness served well the multiple generations charged with the ranch's legacy. In Rick's time at the helm of Smathers Hereford Ranch, he used this grit to withstand the drought of 2011. His herd of 75 mama cows dwindled to 15 amid the arid conditions. But, Rick simply refused to sell out his registered Herefords.

"That was our pivotal moment to coming so close to giving up, but we suffered through it and built back from that," Rick says. "That never-say-quit mentality came into play. Just hang on to the best you can, so you have the best you can to build back with."

And, build back, he did. Today, the family is back to 75 cows that they're constantly improving. But, it's not only the cow herd moving forward in Llano. Each generation of the Smathers family is committed to the land and leaving it better than they found it, something retired Extension agent and current land improvement entrepreneur Rick takes quite seriously.



Current owner Rick Smathers' grandfather, Forest Smathers (left), and father, Charles Winfred "PeeWee" Smathers (right), tend to Hereford cattle.

Rick's father started improving the grasses and implementing fertilizer and weed control programs.

"His philosophy was if there is a way to improve the tonnage and the pounds of forage that you can produce, then we need to pursue those opportunities," Rick says. "Help Mother Nature help us."

The collaboration between Mother Nature and the Smathers men must be working. Each generation has left its mark of improvement on the land and, subsequently, the herd. Stocking rates have increased from one animal unit per 20 acres to one animal unit per 5 acres through rotational grazing and forage management practices. This improved stocking rate has made it possible for the Smathers family to not only run cattle more efficiently but also have extra hay set aside for years of drought or poor grazing.

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### Bald-faced determination

While the Smathers family's commitment to land stewardship and improvement is undoubtedly paramount to their success, their bald-faced breed of choice also deserves some credit for their longevity. Chosen initially by J.J. Smathers as the "in" and "elite" breed of the time, Hereford cattle have stood the test in time in Llano because of their toughness, efficiency and fertility.

"For us, it is a continuation of that legacy. Along with that, the breed has so many valuable traits that meet our climate here. The Hereford breed does well in the Texas Hill Country, and

Their docile temperament makes them a favorite with son Slade as well. The young showman has big plans for the family's registered Hereford herd inside the showing and out. Slade already garnered the record-seller in Llano County with a homebred Hereford, and his sights are set on one day breeding a Fort Worth winner.



Eleven-year-old Slade has already seen his selection of more showing centric genetics pay off. Here he and his parents, Rick and Jodye Smathers, pose with several banners he garnered at the Llano County, Texas, show.



Fourth and fifth generation ranchers, Slade (left) and Rick (right), now care for Smathers Hereford Ranch.



Rick Smathers' late daughter Jacey also loved Hereford cattle and was an accomplished showman.

their milking ability, the marbling, etc., make it a breed that the ranchers want to have," Rick says. "Another really important part of the Hereford breed to us, to be real honest, is that they're a docile breed, the temperament is real good, and you can manage them without a lot of cowboying, so to say."

When asked how he liked his Hereford cattle, Slade replied, "Well, big-bellied cattle, with calving ease and good milking ability that are still just plain stout and clean fronted."

With clear goals for the future, Slade is already dreaming of the day that he will be the steward of the Smathers Hereford Ranch legacy — with an elite set of Hereford cattle and some Brahman-Hereford-cross commercial cows for good measure. Rick and Jodye also think about this day because their goal is to leave Smathers Hereford Ranch a little better than they found it — ready for the next generation. Just like the many generations of Smathers before.

"Our operation has just been built on hard work and honesty, and we intend to continue that philosophy and way of life to help our kids grow and understand the agricultural life," Rick says. "Our goal is that our ranch doesn't leave our family and that future generations have a place to grow and learn."

That is undoubtedly what Slade — the next Smathers in a long line of ranchers — has in mind.

"I plan on keeping it for the rest of my life," Slade says. **HW**