

At 93, Leonard Smith has lived the Hereford ranching life for nearly a century. Now his sons and grandsons face the next century of ranch life with

Determination, Courage and A Sense of History

by Ellen H. Godwin • photos by Geof Godwin



(Color photo inset at top) Leonard Smith today at age 93. (Black and white photo, circa 1965) Leonard (left) with son Billy. (Color photo inset at bottom) Three generations — from left, son Billy, Leonard Smith, son Charles and grandson Ward. Not pictured, grandson Sid.



"I was born February 5, 1904," Leonard Smith states plainly. This registered Hereford producer near Oakville, Texas, has literally grown up with the Hereford breed in the United States, and particularly in

South Texas. With his cattle, he has survived depression, war, drought, high feed costs and low cattle prices, to name a few, for 93 years. He is celebrated because of his longevity and commitment to the Here-

ford breed and his sons and grandsons take pride in his accomplishments. His gentle character belies the toughness which consistency and constancy require in a person. But his grandson Ward says, "We

may not be a big ranch, but we're an old ranch."

Smith is a widower these days, but he has two fine sons, Charles and Billy, who have ranches and Hereford cattle herds of their own, and grandchildren who seem to like to spend time with their grandfather and talk about Smith's long and rich life.

"My father's first contact with registered Hereford cattle was at the Fat Stock Show in 1898 at Fort Worth. Mr. B.C. Rhome had some Hereford cattle out there on the prairie. According to the American Hereford Association records, my father had his first registered Hereford bull in 1904 which he used to breed commercial cattle," Smith explains.

"In 1913, he bought 10 heifers and a bull from J.W. Cook and Sons in Beeville," whom Smith describes as a noted Hereford breeder of the day. "The first bull calves were born in 1917 and 1918." Smith was nine years old when his father bought those first registered heifers. The Smith homeplace was about eight miles from Beeville on the road from Katy to Oakville and Smith remembers going with his father to trail the cattle from J.W. Cook and Sons to their ranch.

"I started raising club calves about that time and my sister and I would show them at fairs. I bought one of those heifers in 1919 from my dad," and that was the beginning of his herd of registered Herefords, almost 80 years ago.

In 1924, Smith started his college career at Texas A&M. He graduated in 1928, and remembers, "Jobs were scarce then and the Depression came along. All through the Depression I still kept the cattle." One way he did that was working in the cotton classing office in Beeville for \$80 a month. Smith's son Charles explains, "He went around three counties taking the cotton census. At that time, they didn't have a speedy way of keeping count of the cotton being ginned. His job was to go to all the area cotton gins to take a census." Smith remembers, "We had 10 gins in Bee County, 10 in Live Oak County and two in McMullen. And not a one now. To

get this job I had to take a civil service examination. Another lady and I took it and it was up to the Congressman to pick who he wanted. Mr. Dick Kleberg was the Congressman. I went down to Corpus Christi to thank him in 1932 and Lyndon

the government bought calves for \$5 a head so people could buy meat. That's the year he met his future wife, Helen.

"Then in 1937, Mr. Royce Booth, A Hereford breeder down here, and Claude Heard were trying to find a



Sidney Smith (left) with son Leonard Smith, circa 1965.

Johnson was his secretary. I talked to him about 30 minutes and he wanted me to come back and see him sometime."

In later years, Smith enjoyed the Hereford tours to various areas of Texas. "We used to go on these Hereford tours up at Blanco when Lyndon Johnson was the Congressman. Later on we'd say we'd had dinner at the White House. He never was there, but we'd always say we'd had dinner at Johnson's," he says with mischief.

In 1931, Smith began leasing land for ranching. One ranch, which he leased from Rocky Reagan, encompassed 2,000 acres and Smith paid 50 cents an acre for the lease. In 1934 the Federal Land Bank foreclosed on the land and two businessmen and a doctor bought the property. "Then they leased it to me and I've leased it ever since," Mr. Smith says, and Charles continues, "We are dealing with the third generation of those families now."

1934 was a year to remember in Smith's life. It was the year he went to Civilian Conservation Corps camp in Conroe for eight months for reserve training. That's the year

market for bulls. They called one day and suggested we get in touch with Dick Scott." These men and others were responsible for organizing the South Texas Hereford Association, a 60-year-old organization. "I'm the last member of that charter group," Smith says. "We've been associated with Texas Hereford and the American Hereford Association all the same time," he adds.

When Smith graduated from Texas A&M, he was commissioned as a second lieutenant in the Reserves. During the Depression years, that pay from the two weeks training became significant to the Smith family bottom line. Not long after he bought his ranch in 1938, he was called into active duty in the Army Air Corps as the U.S. prepared for World War II.

He remembers, "In July 1940, the government started calling the National Guard and in '41 they started calling in the Reserves. It was voluntary." Smith had been promoted to captain at this time and was sent to Fort Logan, Colorado, where he trained clerks for the Air Corp. "We had the first class of trainees," he remembers. "They had called in a

bunch of Reserve officers and most of them had been in the CCC and had some administrative experience. We did the administration of all the paperwork and secretary training. The first squadrons had 200 men in them and we taught a four-month course. I was there during Pearl Harbor. After Pearl Harbor, they put 800 men in a squadron and made a two-month course out of it."

His father took care of the ranch while he was serving in the Army. Smith was in Colorado about three and a half years and came back home as often as he could. However, not one to miss an opportunity, he made it to the Denver Stock Shows in Colorado where he saw the two first \$50,000 bulls sell.

After his stint in the Army Air Corps, Smith, his wife and son Billy moved back to the ranch near Oakville, where they have been raising and selling registered and commercial Herefords ever since.

Both Billy and Charles lease ranches and have developed a market for F1 cattle which are popular in the rugged South Texas brush country. While each brother and their father have their own cattle and lease their own ranches, "We each share the work and share some of the same places," Charles says. The ranch off Highway 37 is the headquarters ranch and is the showplace for registered bulls which are for sale. "We normally don't have other cattle here," he explains.

The Smiths have enjoyed a tremendous bull market over the years. Smith Hereford bulls have been sold to Israel, Venezuela, Mexico, Guatemala, and of course, into West and East Texas. Charles sees the market for bulls changing somewhat from his earlier days. "Our market has changed from out West (Texas) to East. We still sell bulls out West, but so many of the ranchers out there are getting \$5 an acre for hunting and the land is not worth but a dollar an acre for cattle. But in East Texas, there are still a lot of ranches."

The traditional registered bull buyer has changed as well as the market, Charles explains. "About half of them have other income.

Used to, all our buyers were ranchers and farmers wanting bulls. Now, for about half of them it's a weekend job, or they are teaching school, or are a banker or are retired." Charles is still a full-time rancher and farmer while Billy ranches and maintains an off-the-farm job.

"We've been selling bulls here for a long time," Charles says, adding, "We don't pamper the bulls. We just try to keep them growing. Some of our customers don't feed, so you better have a bull that can go out and be able to rustle on his own and be able to walk and cover country." The Smiths sell the majority of the bulls at two years of age weighing about 1200 to 1400 pounds. "Most of the ranchers want to turn them straight out on their ranches. They don't want to grow out yearlings," Billy explains.

Charles and Billy remember a picture their aunt had from their father's show cattle days. Charles says, "I recall them being finer-boned cattle. They were as tall as we have now, but were finer-boned. Then, during our growing up years," he says, nodding to Billy, "is when they went to the short, compact cattle. Now, they are growing taller and have a lot more bone in them." Over the years, the Smiths have added newer bloodlines to their herd with an eye for soundness so the cattle can move over the rough country with ease, and with attention to muscle thickness. Their Anxiety Fourth bloodlines have been blended with Onwards, Line 1, Barber and Indian Mound bulls.

Smith has been a stabilizing factor in his community for more than 50 years. He helped organize the Live Oak County Soil Conservation group in 1946 and was one of the five directors of the organization. "In 1955, the local bank wanted somebody on the board who knew something about agriculture," Charles says, and Smith adds with a chuckle, "40 years later I retired from the bank board." In 1960 Smith helped organize the local Farm Bureau, "and when the local county fair was run by more volunteers," Charles explains, "he worked

at it every year."

The Smith brothers are committed to seeing Smith Herefords survive into the next century. How will they do it? Charles admits that sometimes he doesn't know. "In agriculture, it's cash flow. There have been a lot of times when I've had to sell when I didn't want to sell." But, he and Billy have taken note of the rising income from South Texas land managed for wildlife and hunting. Billy says he intends to decrease his stocking rate to allow the wildlife species to develop. Charles' comment on the move away from ranches with strictly improved pastures to brushy pastures is, "The thing about improved pasture is when it's gone it's gone. That brush is a renewable resource. When you have some brush, that gives the cows something to root around on and eat. The brush also provides hunting revenue, which pays the taxes," he adds.

One unfortunate, but slightly humorous aspect to adding hunting lease income to the ranch business is having to turn away friends who used to bird hunt for free. "Some of them got upset with me," Charles says shaking his head.

The elder Smith listens to this conversation and chuckles at the irony. "We go to the city for entertainment," he says, "and they (the urban professionals) want to come to the country for entertainment."

Smith Herefords has been a mainstay in the South Texas ranching heritage for decades. Charles and Billy are looking back at the variety of things their father and grandfather did to survive and are applying those lessons of adaptability to their ranching. Their goal: Hang on into the next century. It takes courage, it takes determination and a sense of history helps make it seem worthwhile. Like grandson Ward says, "We're not a big ranch, but we're an old ranch," and he, his father, his uncle and his grandfather would like to see it get much older with registered and commercial Hereford and quality F1 cattle.★