PIONEERS
of the Butler Bloodline

The rapid approach of the 21st Century and the 30-year anniversary of Milby Butler's death provide an appropriate point at which to reflect on the state of the Butler bloodline in today's Texas Longhorn industry. The breed and the bloodline are thriving in numbers that 20 or 30 years ago would have seemed impossible, considering the breed's climb from a small, precious number of cattle—raised by but a few dedicated breeders committed to the Longhorn's survival.

Many knowledgeable observers have noted that more Butler blood runs through the veins of today's Texas Longhorns than the genetics of any other family. This, coupled with the fact that early Butler genetics are documented to have been introduced into five of the other six families of Longhorns (the Yates line is the only family not known to have any Butler influence) demonstrates just how essential to the breed the Butler bloodline has been.

The number of programs producing straight-Butler cattle continues to grow and "genetic-blend" programs are finding the addition of Butler blood essential for a successful blending of the families. Add to this a consistently strong market demand based upon public auction sales receipts as well as private treaty sales, survey results and polling data [compiled by the *Journal* in recent years], and you have strong evidence that the Butlers are indeed the family of choice among today's Texas Longhorn producers. A bloodline once thought to be too inbred to remain viable may well be the only family to survive in a truly pure form.

The story of Milby and Henry Butler — the early years spent locating and collecting long-horned cattle from the coastal prairies near Houston to the thickets, swamps and river bottoms of East Texas—is now an essential part of Longhorn lore. Later years would see the addition of a decidedly Mexican influence through Milby's favorite cow, Miss John Wayne. The cattle were then selectively bred for those traits which Milby felt best reflected the "old blood," including the trait that would become his life long passion, horns.

Milby's understanding of horn growth remains unmatched, and he and his cattle will forever be defined by those glorious, long, corkscrew-twisted horns. Theirs, however, is but the first chapter in the story of the Butler Texas Longhorns.

Lesser-known are the men that came after, those that literally saved the bloodline from extinction and for a moment in time held the future of the breed in their hands. Can you imagine what the breed would look like today if we had lost the Butler bloodline all those years ago? It seems only fitting that we look again at those whose efforts have made us and the breed so much richer. The sub-families bear their names: Partlow, Graves, Meshell, Lepper, Holman, Sanders and Shinn—but who were these men that had accomplished this monumental feat?

To portray the aforementioned figures as noble men of great vision, driven to help keep the bloodline and the breed from disappearing forever, would make for a truly romantic tale. The truth, however, tends to be quite unromantic at best. The most ironic thing is that it all happened by sheer unadulterated luck. Each and every man considered himself extremely lucky to end up with the cattle they did. Some were simply in the right place at the right time; but for others, the Butler herd was the only place they knew of to acquire quality Longhorns. They had no idea of the roles they would play in the survival of these cattle, but one thing is certain: though fate and chance brought them these animals, each of these men made the very most of their opportunities and successfully cared for and propagated the cattle until such time as those that followed could be passed the torch.

Milby Butler, founder of the Butler bloodline.

Butler Texas Longhorns were acquired in several ways. It was very common for Milby and Henry to give or loan cattle to people they liked. The cattle that were loaned were returned after sufficient progeny had been raised. Milby, always described as a generous man, often said that he had rarely sold a Longhorn but had given away more than he could remember.

Proof of Milby's generosity could be found in the outstanding quality of these cattle. Milby and Henry both took great pride in supplying their friends with some of their best genetics. On those rare occasions Longhorns were sold, they were always remembered to have priced the animals very fairly, never seeking to get rich off the cattle. Milby also consigned several lots to early TLBAA sales in an effort to support the fledgling association.

The bulk of the Butler herd was sold after Milby's death on October 16, 1971 (others had already been sold following Mrs. Butler's death several years earlier). The hurried manner in which the cattle were dispersed was the greatest threat to the bloodline. Cattle were penned by pastures and sold at the local sale barns of the area at the earliest opportunity. This left little chance for breeders to find out when and where the cattle would be sold. Most of Milby's cattle were located at Ames, Texas (near Liberty), so the majority were sold at the nearby Raywood auction barn (the same facility where Blackie Graves would disperse his herd some 26 years later).

The few ranchers that did attend and buy cattle did not have unlimited funds to devote to purchasing large numbers of cattle—and in any case, these buyers had no idea of just how close to extinction the bloodline really was. Most buyers ended up with between five and ten head. It is estimated that approximately 80% of Milby's cattle went to slaughter. Of the remaining 20% some died of natural causes or disappeared—peddled and scattered to the winds by cattle traders. To combine the surviving numbers with those already in private herds of such breeders as the Partlows, Blackie Graves, Virgil Shinn and the Meshells, would render a total of no more than between 150 and 175 head of Butler Texas Longhorns left in the world. Yet like the Longhorn itself, the Butler cattle would survive and thrive, because they are true Texas Longhorns and it is what they do best.

Existing in small groups and (with few exceptions) isolated from one another, the numbers of the dispersed Butler cattle began to increase. Two factors contributed greatly to their regeneration: the cattle were purchased in groups which usually included a bull, which allowed the cattle to remain pure Butler, not just pure Longhorn. As these gene pools were inbred, they produced cattle that were genetically potent and predictable.

Secondly, the cattle were purchased by men who either already were or would become steadfastly committed to the breed. The greatest evidence of this commitment is that to a man, they kept their cattle to the very end. Of those among this group that have passed away, each died owning Butler Texas Longhorns, and those still living have sworn to follow suit. Other similarities can be seen in these men: most all of them loved nature and animals—wild and domesticated. Most

by **KASO KETY**

had grown up with Longhorns, and many credit their grandfathers' stories of Longhorns with sparking their interest in the breed. Many of these ranchers also raised Brahman cattle. Like the Longhorns, Brahmans were tough, horned cattle, and the reds could also be quite colorful. Among these men, many conversations that started with Brahmans ended on the subject of Longhorns.

The one attribute that all these men loved and were drawn to was, of course, those magnificent horns...corkscrewed and twisted, with tip-to-tip measurements that would be noteworthy even by today's standards. It may well be that the survival of the Butler cattle is owed to the one trait that Milby based much of his breeding program on.

From Milby Butler on down to our pioneer Butler breeders and on to those that breed Butler cattle today, an undying love of horn is the thread that ties us together...and what makes the subjects of the following profiles "men for the ages" in the annals of Texas Longhorn history.

One of the best known names in Butler breeding is that of **F.M. "Blackie" Graves** of Dayton, Texas. Born Frederick Merle Graves on September 29, 1919, he was quickly given the ironic nickname "Blackie" after his hair turned snow white at a very early age. He had been taking his mares to breed to Milby's Appaloosa stud and became quite taken with the Butler Longhorns. Blackie got his first Longhorns as a hobby in 1962 when he received the bull Sam as a gift from Henry Butler. Not long after that, Blackie obtained some cows from the Partlow family in nearby Liberty. He later purchased additional animals, ending up with as many as 20 head hand-picked from the original Butler herd.

The addition of the sires Classic and Monarch in 1977 vaulted Blackie's herd to the top of the industry—and his cattle became as respected as the man whose brand they wear. More leading breeding programs have been based on his genetics than any other herd and his may well prove to be the most influential herd (next to Milby's) the breed has yet seen. Blackie has used different bloodlines over the years but they have always been rooted in his "Butler base." At his 1997 dispersal sale, Blackie's straight-Butler cattle were the most fiercely battled for. It is reassuring to observe that the man who gave the Butler bloodline so many of its very finest and best known individuals has once again returned to his roots and today keeps a small herd of straight-Butler cattle near his home in Dayton, Texas.

F.M. "Blackie" Graves

R.G."Gerry" and Sam Partlow

The Partlow family of Liberty, Texas is one of the oldest families in this entire area and like many other families relied on Longhorn cattle for their very existence. The Longhorns were not only a source of beef but also fulfilled the family's dairy needs, with as many as fifteen Longhorn cows at a time used for milk. Steers were broke to yoke and were used to bring logs out of the river swamps.

As the years passed the Partlows developed a large herd of Brahmans and it was through a Brahman-raising friend that R. Gerald "Gerry" Partlow (born November 1881) met Milby Butler in the mid 1950s. The two quickly hit it off and the Butler and Partlow families became very close. In Partlow, Milby had found another old-time cattleman and he rewarded Partlow's love for the Longhorns by giving him some of his most outstanding cattle. Butler would visit every so often and bring several cows or swap out bulls. All he would say is that they were of his very best breeding.

The Partlow herd is generally considered to be the cream of Butler genetics because of the way Milby hand-picked the animals for them over the many years of their friendship. It was from these cattle that Gerald's brother William Dozier "Dode" Partlow (born December 24, 1891) and Blackie Graves obtained their first cattle. Gerald passed away in June of 1969 and Dode followed in 1981. In 1979, with his health in decline, Dode sold the majority of the Partlow cattle to Darol Dickinson of Colorado.

The herd obtained by Dickinson contained many outstanding individuals that would rank at the top of the breed for many years, becoming household names in the process. Gerry's son Sam assumed the care and management of the remaining animals and continues to keep a small but excellent herd, furthering the Partlow family tradition of raising big-horned Butler cattle. More than being just a bunch of cattle, the Texas Longhorns remain a part of the Partlow way of life.

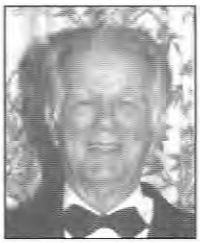
Virgil Shinn was born March 25, 1902 in Leon, West Virginia and moved with his family to Idaho when he was seven years old. He fell in love with the Rocky Mountains from the moment he arrived and for the next 72 years was in awe of their beauty. "Virg" herded sheep at age eleven. He loved all types of livestock and owned several breeds of cattle including Herefords and Brahmans. In 1966 a friend talked him into getting a few Longhorns. He was a rodeo cowboy that had lived in Houston and, as luck would have it, happened to know Milby Butler. Shinn bought a bull ("Elmer") and four heifers, and Milby threw in a steer.

It was quite a journey in 1966 for an old pickup truck and a bumper-hitch trailer carrying a full load of Longhorns from League City, Texas to Idaho Falls. The herd produced a small but outstanding pool of genetics and several daughters of Quarter Circle V-branded cows still remain. Virgil loved the cattle for their horns and history, and still had his foundation breeding stock when he died on March 15, 1981. The herd was maintained by Virgil's daughter Jean Shinn until it was sold in 1985.

Virgil Shinn (photo courtesy Jean Shinn)

Ruel Sanders of Magnolia, Texas was born on October 4, 1909. His father was a cattle buyer who would gather cattle on the open rangeland between Magnolia and Montgomery and ship them to market by rail from Magnolia to Houston. Ruel Sanders had been raised with Longhorn cattle and had been wanting some of his own for many years when he finally got his chance.

A friend of Sanders' named Pete Jones told him of a group of Longhorns that would be selling at Hockley. They had been sold by Pauline Russell not long before at Raywood



Ruel Sanders

as part of the Butler estate sale and were then trucked to Hockley to be resold. From this group Sanders bought a bull (Bevo) and six cows. Pete Jones also bought four or five others which he traded away shortly thereafter. Ruel Sanders, however, raised a significant number of cattle over the years and at the time of his death most of his herd's breeding went back to those original animals.

While he appreciated their toughness, Sanders would say he most enjoyed the horns and color of the cattle. He passed away on May 31, 1997, having successfully carried on his share of the Butler legacy.

Luman Holman of Jacksonville, Texas was born April 17, 1919. His family owned large herds of open range cattle, and he was raised to respect the Longhorn for its toughness and independence. When he sought to stock his ranch with cattle, Mr. Holman knew the kind he wanted: tough, functional, hardy cattle he wouldn't have to pamper. Holman's son Kent, a large-scale cattle buyer, happened to notice a group of Milby's estate cattle brought in for sale at China, Texas (near Beaumont). Knowing of his father's desire to own some, he bought the herd and transported them back to Jacksonville. The group numbered near 25 head and consisted of a bull (Holman B-1) as well as pairs, bred cows, and several steers. Mr. Holman continues to raise Longhorns today that trace back directly to many of the original Butlers, especially the B-1 line. He states that he has always preferred the Butler cattle in his herd because, in his words, "They reflect the true Longhorn traits of the cattle I remembered as a boy." When asked what he likes best about them, Mr. Holman replied "Their hardiness, fertility—you can always depend on a calf crop. And of course, I always like the biggest-horned cattle...and the Butlers were always of superior quality in that respect."

Luman Holman

Brothers Dewitt and Sammy Meshell first met Milby Butler in 1964 when they would pass the Butler ranch at League City on their way to work in Houston. They stopped one day for a visit and ended up regular visitors (sometimes once a week) until Milby's death some seven years later. The Meshells helped out on the ranch and spent many hours talking with Milby and Henry about their cattle. The brothers were longtime horn lovers and had tried for years to raise grade or common-horned cattle. The Meshells abandoned these attempts after receiving seventeen head of "*real* horned cattle" from Henry in 1968. These cattle were pastured near Toledo Bend and many were killed by poachers seeking to steal their heads. Those that survived were moved to Trinity where the Meshells still ranch today.

Dewitt Meshell at the 1998 Butler Breedeers' Invitational Sale.

The Meshells acquired seven more head from the dispersal of Milby's estate cattle and acquired the bull Lone Ranger 72 from Henry Butler. From this small beginning they were able to raise a large number of cattle. Many of these have proven to be among the bloodline's most influential individuals. And while the Meshell brothers considered themselves incredibly lucky (to be horn lovers and end up with the best horn bloodlines of the Butlers) it is much more than luck that has perpetuated this herd—it is a deep and heartfelt love for the cattle that have kept their big-horned dreams coming true with each new generation.

Sammy was born February 23, 1942, and passed away on March 10 of this year. Dewitt was born December 13, 1936 and today bravely faces his own medical challenges while continuing to raise his beloved Longhorns with the same infectious enthusiasm he has long been known for. He has been the Butler bloodline's greatest historian and ambassador and can take pride in his instrumental role in helping to relocate and keep track of the Butler cattle in the critical years following Milby's death.

Forrest Lepper was born March 19, 1912 in Houston, Texas. His father owned a dairy in Alvin, which would provide Forrest's start in the livestock business. He began hauling livestock in the days before gooseneck trailers and was one of the few men in this line of work. He hauled cattle for nearly everyone in a very large area around Houston. Lepper owned a herd of Brahmans but in his travels was able to view and evaluate many different breeds of cattle.

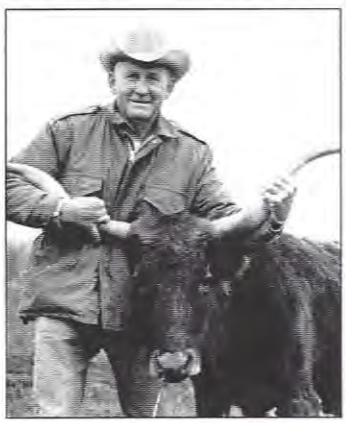
With this variety from which to formulate his interests, Forrest soon settled on Longhorns. He enjoyed the historic element and nostalgia of the breed, but it was the horns he loved most. When he came across the exceptionally long-horned Butler estate cattle being sold he used this opportunity to make his first Longhorn purchase. From these few head, he built a herd of 30-some head by the time of his death in 1975. The small herd included the Butler sire Thomas, who was used each year on the entire herd, producing a very uniform, genetically tight group of cattle which are still highly fertile and productive today.

Forrest Lepper

In 1977 Forrest Lepper's daughter Peggy Swaboda sold the Longhorns with the bulk going to three breeders, Michael McLeod and partner Maribeth Vineyard and Dr. Harmon Knight.

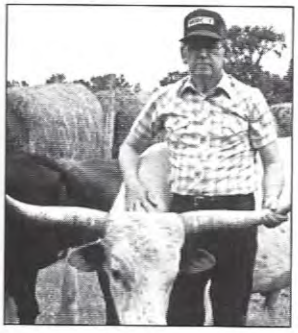
During the seventies four more breeders who began raising Butler cattle would prove to have a profound and positive impact on the breed. This "second generation" of Butler breeders, while maybe not the true pioneers their predecessors were, nonetheless have played important roles in sustaining the overall high quality of the Butler bloodline.

J.W. ISAACS of Alvin, Texas obtained his first Butler Texas Longhorns from the estate of Mrs. Butler, buying 14 two-year-olds. Isaacs had been raised with Longhorns and knew just how tough the cattle really were. It was exactly this type of female he wanted to use in his commercial operation. After all these years he still is raising cross-bred calves out of purebred cows. They have to earn a place in his registered herd and J.W. uses the commercial herd as a testing ground for his replacements.



J.W. Isaacs

"I knew what I wanted to accomplish in the commercial cattle business using Longhorn cows and I have not been proven wrong yet," states J.W. He bought seven more Butler cows after Milby's death, including Fawnie 153, the mother of Beauty (Classic's dam



Wiley Knight

Michael McLeod, Blackie Graves and Kaso Kety

and a cow recognized as one of the breed's all-time greats). J.W. has also held a preference for Butler-bred bulls in developing one of the most respected Butler influenced programs in the industry. He and his wife Edith still raise Longhorns on their Rafter J Ranch near Alvin and J.W. says you can still find, even today, direct descendants of those original cows.

WILEY KNIGHT grew up among his father's Longhorn herd, and his opportunity to acquire his own arose in 1977 when Pauline Russell (a friend from church) mentioned that she would be selling several head at the Raywood auction barn. This group of cattle included Classic, Monarch, Reveille, Lady Butler and a long yearling named Butler Boy. Knight purchased Butler Boy and Lady Butler and shortly after acquired two heifers from Dode Partlow. Both were top daughters of Conquistador, soon to be known as Party Girl and Knight's Miss Liberty.

From these beginnings Wiley and his wife Esther built a top-quality herd of Butler cattle on their ranch near New Waverly, Texas. Their original stock produced excellent progeny year after year and this breeding can be found in many herds today. The Knights loved-big horned cattle and with the help of Butler Boy and Party Girl especially, were able to produce some of the biggest horn base cattle to be found anywhere. At the time of Wiley's death he had sold the bulk of his herd to Robert and Kim Richey's Triple R Ranch of San Angelo, Texas where the Richeys continue to use the Knights' big-horned Butler genetics.

MICHAEL McLEOD of Edna, Texas will forever be connected to Forrest Lepper—even though the two never met. In 1977, Michael and partner Maribeth Vineyard were told about a group of Longhorns being sold just south of Houston. It turned out to be the Lepper estate herd being sold by Lepper's daughter Peggy Swaboda. Michael had wanted to own Longhorns since childhood, having often admired those owned by his grandfather. In spite of Maribeth's reluctance, the herd was purchased and moved to the West Ward Ranch at Vanderbilt.

After initially outcrossing the cows because of the heavy amount of inbreeding, they accidentally found the life of the Lepper subfamily in the form of one of the original bull calves, He's A Ten. If at any moment this bull had been sold, killed or had been a disappointment as a herd sire, it is safe to say the Lepper sub-family would have died with him. Yet he consistently sired outstanding offspring which ensured his use for many years on the pure Lepper females. A great deal of Lepper blood can be found today as a result of these matings and from a small group of inbred cattle the Butler bloodline has found one of its most productive gene pools.

McLeod bought out Maribeth's share of the cattle and has built his herd into the largest straight-Butler herd in the industry,

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representing all Butler sub-families. He is a "true horn lover" and has always enjoyed the larger Butler horns over other bloodlines. His cattle are run under very harsh conditions and must perform and adapt to a hostile environment which his Butler cattle have done magnificently for over twenty-two years.

Johnnie and Ruth Hoffman

JOHNNIE HOFFMAN was raised in Gonzales County, Texas. His grandfather owned Longhorns and Johnnie could recall as a boy when the train came through carrying Longhorns the government had gathered to start a herd in Oklahoma. Tired of doctoring the large exotics on his Folsom, Louisiana ranch, Johnnie remembered the tough and hardy Longhorns of his childhood. He made a deal with a local slaughterhouse man, swapping his exotics for a group of Longhorns the man had picked up.

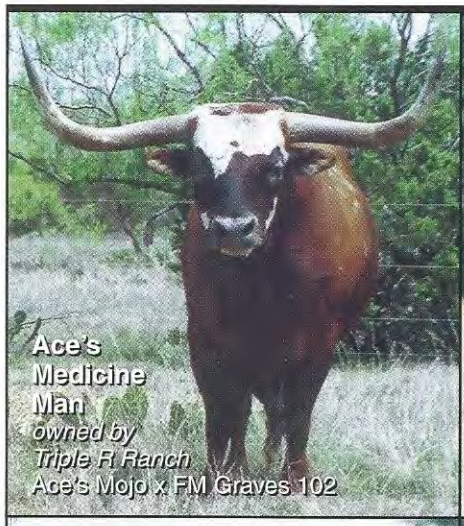
Johnnie's first exposure to Butler cattle was through Blackie Graves after the two met at a TLBAA convention in San Antonio. Mr. Johnnie often said that he "Had never seen cattle of that quality before. I knew right then that those were the kind of cattle I wanted." He began purchasing heifers each year from Mr. Blackie and based his program around this breeding. The two men became close friends, with a relationship built on mutual admiration and respect.

At the time of his death, Mr. Johnnie had developed a herd of "blend genetics" cattle that was widely considered the best in the business. But while many know him for his outstanding blend cattle, he also raised some of the finest straight-Butlers the bloodline has yet seen.

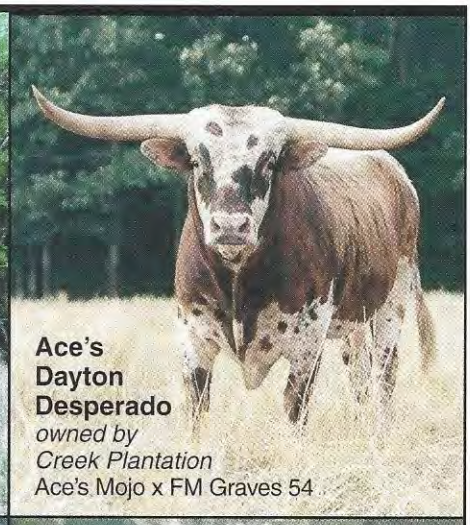
The eighties would see the names of men like Red McCombs, Robert Harrell, and R.L. Londot (founder of Ace Cattle Co.) brought into industry prominence. While this generation of breeders came from backgrounds much different from the pioneer Butler breeders, their love of horn and the breed also ran deep. Their desire to own and raise the very finest straight-Butler cattle helped to promote the bloodline and its most outstanding individuals. Butler breeders today continue to reap the rewards which are the direct result of the time, money and planning invested by these men. They helped spur and maintain the high market demand which the family continues to enjoy today.

Other men that deserve recognition as producers of excellent Butler cattle that continue to make an impact on the bloodline and the breed include Herschael Ayers, Dr. Harmon Knight, Dr. E.B. "Booster" Stephenson and Barry Bay. As the Butler story is told it becomes very apparent that each man has played a vital role in the life of this bloodline. Some large, some small, but each as important as the next.

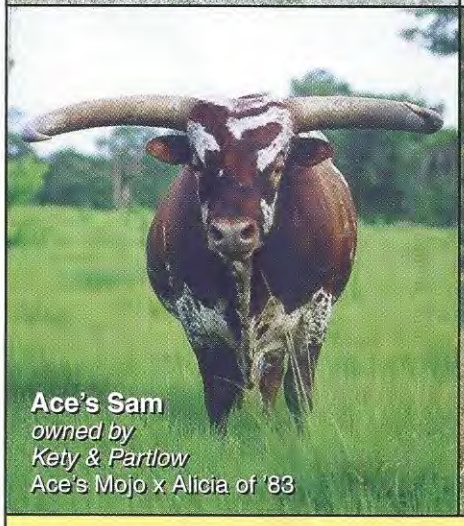
POSTSCRIPT: *While researching this article, I was wrapping up a visit with Mr. Sam Partlow when he made a statement that will stay with me forever: "We owed them. We owed the Longhorns because they saved Texas. Without them none of us would even be here," Sam said, quite matter-of-factly. On my long drive home I thought about what he had said...and as I looked into my rearview mirror at the trailer behind me, I saw the corkscrew-twisted horns of an old Butler cow rise high into the air, and I realized that it was these men, as much if not more than any others, who had helped to repay that debt.* —KASO KETY



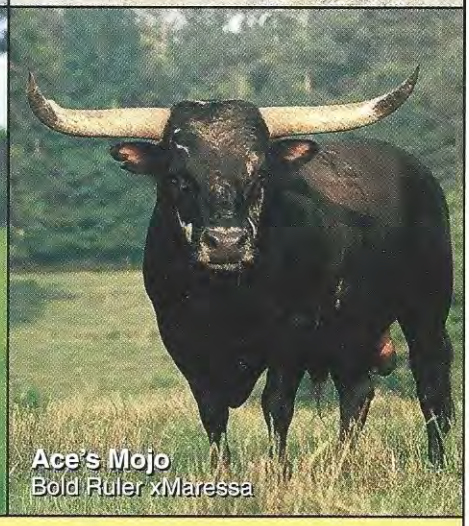
Ace's Medicine Man
owned by
Triple R Ranch
Ace's Mojo x FM Graves 102



Ace's Dayton Desperado
owned by
Creek Plantation
Ace's Mojo x FM Graves 54



Ace's Sam
owned by
Kety & Partlow
Ace's Mojo x Alicia of '83



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