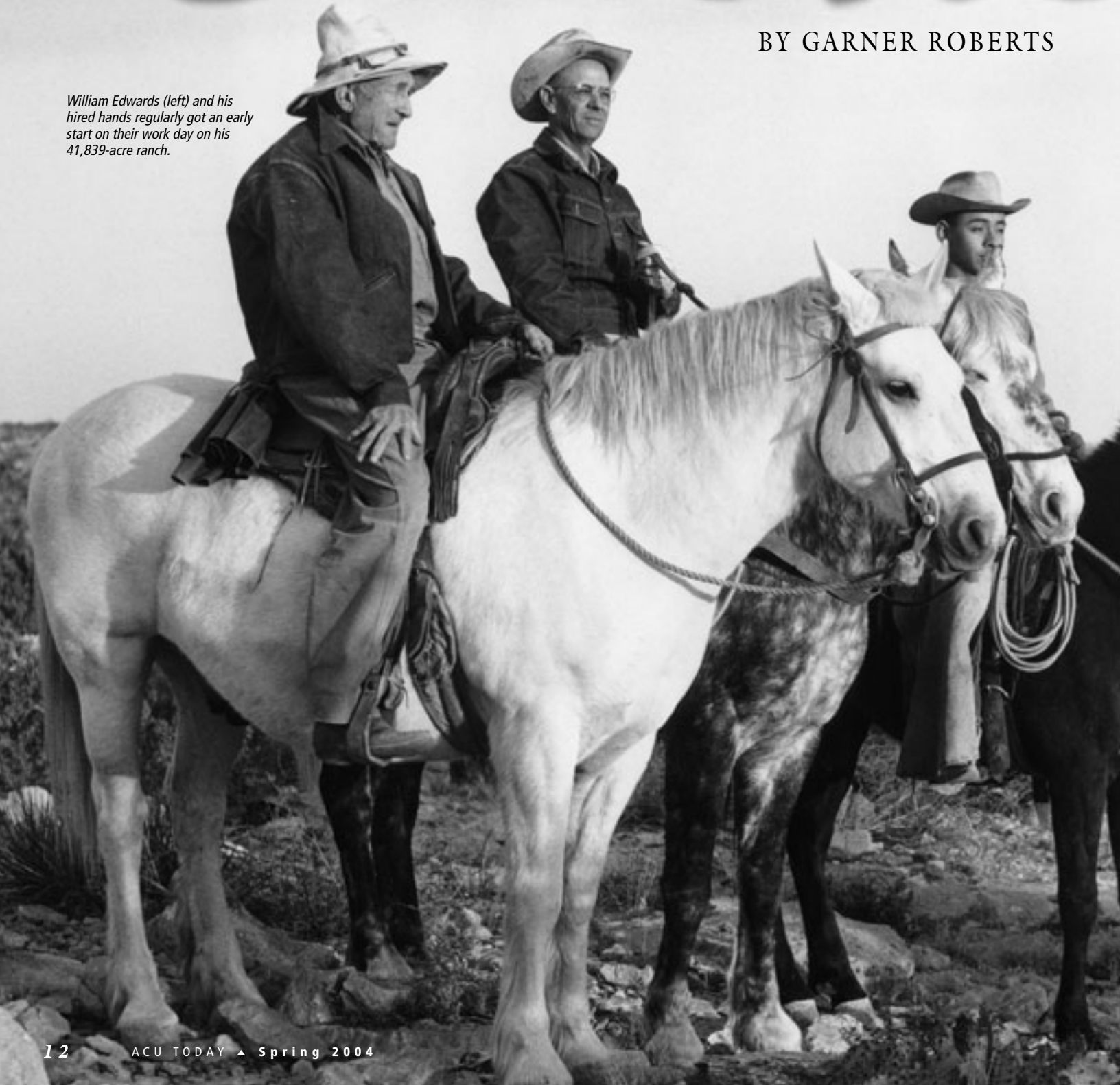


The Ranche

BY GARNER ROBERTS

William Edwards (left) and his hired hands regularly got an early start on their work day on his 41,839-acre ranch.



Dub Etheredge, manager of the Masten Ranch



GERALD EWING

OF ACU

In Howard Hawks' classic 1948 black-and-white movie "Red River," John Wayne shouts from atop his horse, "We're in Texas!" as he and sidekick Walter Brennan cross the river. Brennan, driving their covered wagon, answers, "It feels good to me!"



*F*or them and countless others, Texas is not just a state of mind, not just the object of a droll or diluted allegiance. It's actual earth and sky against which men and women measure themselves.

Few have that primal response to Texas anymore. Few understand the land as their ancestors did. It doesn't reside at the core of their self-awareness but simply serves as the ground upon which they conduct their lives.

"There is beauty here, the beauty of space and of freedom, and the beauty of the wind feeling its way along the brown, grassy swells and ruffling the yellow ridges," says A.C. Greene ('48) in "A Personal Country." "It is strong, stark beauty, having so few ornaments that each... must play an intense part in the composition, subtly forcing the eye out to the horizon and up to the sky."

He calls his hometown of Abilene and West Texas "a sub-Texas unlike the rest of the state in landscape, in people, and in philosophy... If there are fewer of us who retain our identity with a region, there are fewer regions powerful enough to force an identity."

For men such as Tennessee preacher A.B. Barret, the founder of Abilene Christian University, longtime trustee chairman B Sherrod and others instrumental in developing this 98-year-old college, the region did have meaning. It felt good to them also.

Sherrod, college presidents Don H. Morris ('24) and John C. Stevens ('32), and others enlisted the aid of ranchers and pioneer West Texans as they guided development of the college into the university it is today.

The Board of Trustees in the early years was comprised primarily of farmers and ranchers. Donations of cash, land and other gifts from ranchers were pivotal in the survival of



B Sherrod (left) and ACU president Don H. Morris (right) visit with William Edwards outside the 12-room rock house on his ranch in Terrell County.

the young college. Indeed, the campus is located on a historic Texas ranch.

Ranches and ranchers had a major impact on Abilene Christian University.

★ ★ ★ ★ ★

HASHKNIFE RANCH

An old-time cowboy might ride for several outfits in his life, but if the Hashknife was one of them, it became his identity and his one-line biography.

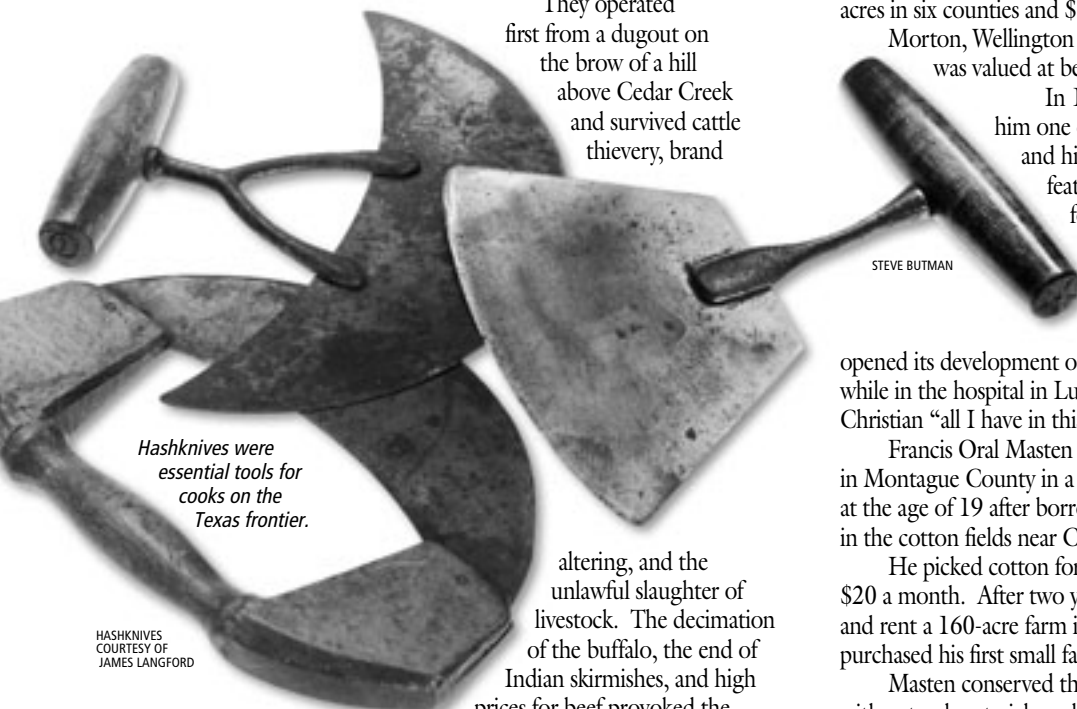
Hashknife Ranch partners James R. Coutts and John N. Simpson built a cattle empire in the late 19th century that covered five ranches and stretched from Texas to Arizona and Montana. It actually started with a cattle drive from Weatherford in Parker County, then west across the Brazos River to unclaimed grassland on Cedar Creek in 1874.

They branded their cattle and horses with Simpson's outline of a hashknife, a common tool used until just a few generations ago by housewives and bunkhouse cooks to chop beef and potatoes into hash.

Hashknife cattle stocked ranches in Taylor County and later along the Pecos River and in Baylor County, Arizona and Montana. Zane Gray immortalized the Hashknife Ranch in his novel "The Hash Knife Outfit" published by Harper in 1933.

Coutts' cattle drives started as early as 1865 when after the Civil War he drove 1,000 head of longhorns across the Rocky Mountains to supply beef to California's growing population. He returned to Parker County and met Simpson, who entered the cattle business in 1872 with plans to move his operation farther west to the free ranges of what would later become Taylor County.

They operated first from a dugout on the brow of a hill above Cedar Creek and survived cattle thievery, brand



Hashknives were essential tools for cooks on the Texas frontier.

HASHKNIVES COURTESY OF JAMES LANGFORD

altering, and the unlawful slaughter of livestock. The decimation of the buffalo, the end of Indian skirmishes, and high prices for beef provoked the uncontrolled spread of cattle rustling on the unfenced prairie.

The Hashknife partners hauled lumber from Weatherford and built a plank house. Their only claim to the surrounding ranges was use and control. (The State of Texas finally granted to Simpson ownership of his land March 19, 1881.)

Taylor County was officially organized in 1878 with Buffalo Gap

as its county seat. Most people expected the railroad to go through Buffalo Gap or north through Fort Phantom Hill, but in a series of meetings at Hashknife Ranch headquarters in late 1880, Simpson convinced the Texas and Pacific Railroad to bisect his ranch with their tracks.

The railroad had reached Fort Worth in 1876, but didn't arrive in the new town site of Abilene, just southwest of ranch headquarters, until January 1881. A sale of town lots was held March 15-16, 1881, and a tent city began to be replaced by stores, churches, banks, saloons, blacksmith shops and lumberyards.

The cattlemen named their town Abilene for the well-known cattle shipping point in Kansas of the same name. The *Dallas Times-Herald* called Abilene, Texas, the "young giant of the west."

Also developing along the railroad tracks in the 25th year of the young town was Childers Classical Institute, the forerunner of ACC and ACU. Faced with the need for more space in 1927, trustees of the college - led by J.S. Arledge, J.C. Reese and W.H. Free - purchased 801 acres northeast of town from several landowners on what was the Hashknife Ranch.

To finance the move, they sold lots for homes around land reserved to build the new campus. The school opened at its new location in 1929.

★ ★ ★ ★ ★

MASTEN RANCH

F.O. Masten believed, "No farmer or no nation is richer than his or its soil."

A self-taught expert at enriching the soil, he described himself simply as a "dirt farmer."

But he was much more. By the time he died Jan. 8, 1980, at the age of 89, he was one of the largest landowners in Texas with 111,310 acres in six counties and \$1,055,198 in five banks in Sudan, Lubbock, Morton, Wellington and Vega. His cattle and cotton empire was valued at between \$12 million and \$50 million.

In 1938 *Progressive Farmer* magazine named him one of the first "master farmers" of Texas, and his innovative farming techniques were featured in *Life* magazine. He won contests for highest cotton yield and value on a five-acre tract of land.

A longtime friend of Morris and Sherrod, Masten was co-chairman with Sherrod of ACU's first development fund after the college opened its development office in 1948. His will, written Oct. 28, 1979, while in the hospital in Lubbock and given to Stevens, awarded to Abilene Christian "all I have in this world."

Francis Oral Masten was born June 23, 1890, at Illinois Bend in Montague County in a farming family of 12 children. He left home at the age of 19 after borrowing \$3 to ride the train to seek his fortune in the cotton fields near Chillicothe and Quanah.

He picked cotton for \$2 a day and worked as a farmhand for \$20 a month. After two years he had saved enough to buy four mules and rent a 160-acre farm in Hardeman County, and then in 1918 he purchased his first small farm.

Masten conserved the soil by deep plowing, and he fertilized his land with natural materials such as cotton waste, burrs and manure to increase yield. Frustrated by working with mules, he dreamed of cultivating large tracts of land with tractors, and newspaper reports say that led Goodyear to develop the first pneumatic tires for tractor wheels.

His purchases of large tracts of land included 111 sections of the famous Matador Ranch known as the Trujillo Ranch that he bought for \$2 million in 1960.

Masten owned land in Lamb, Oldham, Collingsworth, Bailey, Castro, Harris and Cochran counties. Some of it was part of the Panhandle land originally set aside in the Texas Constitution of 1876 to fund construction of the Texas capitol. Contractors were traded 3 million acres in exchange for construction of the impressive granite building completed in 1888.

He apparently kept most every car he owned, never trading in an older one for a new model. Stored in garages and other buildings on his land when he died of cancer were 22 vehicles ranging from Fords and Buicks of the 1940s to a 1976 Cadillac.

He also enriched his community. He donated land for a building for the Sudan Church of Christ and paid for its carpet and pews. He aided local 4-H Club students, sponsored school events, built sports stadiums and helped many Spanish-speaking youths learn English.

Masten was married for more than 50 years to Lilly B. McCorkle, who died in 1967, but the couple's only child died in infancy.

In addition to his hand-written will, Masten also gave Stevens two other notes with instructions to provide for his hired hands and relatives,

who contested the validity of the will. But before the trial began Jan. 5, 1981, in District Court in Littlefield, the college and the family agreed on a settlement.

The two parties equally divided Masten's mineral rights, the family received cultivated farmland, equipment and personal property, and the college received livestock and ranchland in Oldham and Cochran Counties, including half interest in 19 gas wells and 97 oil wells.

"F.O. Masten was a longtime friend of the university," Stevens said. "His great generosity will help insure our commitment to provide a quality educational program. We believe the settlement agreement complies with Mr. Masten's wishes."

Masten's brother, Robert, said the family was "pleased that part of the estate can be used for educational purposes. We hope it will enable young people to attend school who otherwise wouldn't be able to do so."

ACU sold its 71,059 acres in Oldham County, but still owns the 24,455 acres in Cochran County.

Two paintings of Texas ranch life by artist John Meigs adorn two living room walls in the Masten Ranch house.



B Sherrod (left) and F.O. Masten



You'll have to excuse Dub and Paulette Etheredge if they don't answer their phone when you call.

It's their job to manage ACU's 24,455 acres of Masten land, look after the cattle, and keep a watchful eye on the weather, oil pumpers, cattle rustlers and wild pig hunters.

Besides, Dub says, "We live in a house so big sometimes we can't hear the phone ring."

He admits that "it's hard country to live and work in. Living in a desert, there are no shortcuts, no easy way out. You have to do what you think is right even when it's hard. But I love the ranching life."

The Rotan native has been ranching most of his life, working cattle in West Texas and eastern New Mexico. He was working for Dickinson Cattle Co. in Tatum, N.M., when L.D. "Bill" Hilton ('48), vice president emeritus for finance and administration, hired him to manage ACU's Masten land in March 1984.

And don't call him a cowboy. He's a cowpuncher. "I've been punching cows most all my life," he said. "I don't have a lot of money, but I feel like I'm a rich man. This is the best opportunity and the best job I've ever had, working for a Christian university."

He still remembers when he first drove through this part of Texas. Sand was blowing across the road, and Etheredge thought to himself, "How do people make a living in this country?"

Now that's exactly what he's doing. Just recently wind-blown sand covered a fence, and a late-night phone call alerted him to a bull out of its

pasture. Etheredge was up before dawn the next morning on horseback with his dog Rudy to return the bull “before someone got hurt.”

He adds, “The people here is what makes this country, working class, good people. There’s still a handful of old-timers, special people.”

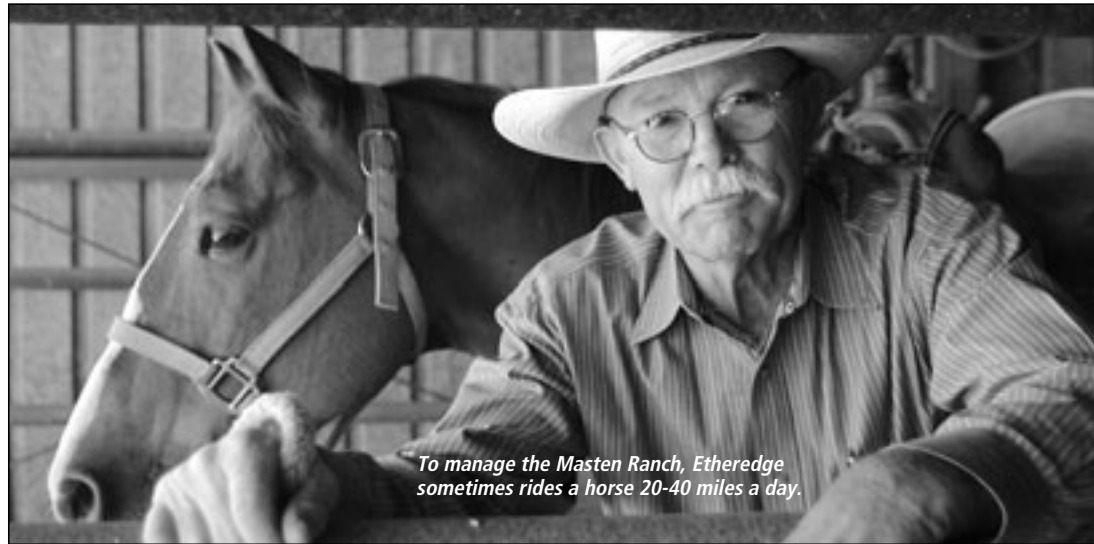
Dub, Paulette and their neighbors still practice the pioneer tradition of helping each other with branding, tending to sick or calving cows, and other ranch chores. (Etheredge was up at 2:45 each morning for about a week recently to drive to Muleshoe to help a friend brand cattle.)

They have no hired hands now to help since their son, Chad, and daughter, Shana, are grown.

Chad, who now lives in Snyder, attended ACU one year before serving in the U.S. Air Force, and Shana, who now teaches in Benjamin, graduated from ACU in 1994 and married wheat farmer Glen Ray Heard.

The Etheredges live in Masten’s spacious, beautiful ranch home that includes two large murals on the east and west walls in the living room painted by artist John Meigs in 1955. Paulette’s photographs of ranch life and grandchildren adorn walls in many of the other rooms.

They attend a small church with about 10 other people, drive to Lubbock, Levelland or Muleshoe occasionally for groceries and supplies, and keep a watchful eye on the weather.



To manage the Masten Ranch, Etheredge sometimes rides a horse 20-40 miles a day.

GERALD EWING

holes to check, calves to wean, evidence of coyotes to observe, and sick or calving cows to find. “It’s a never-ending process,” he said. “Sometimes I ride 20-40 miles a day.”

Etheredge adds, “It’s a terrible country to be a stranger in.” It doesn’t take long to notice that Dub and Paulette Etheredge aren’t strangers here.

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BENNETT RANCH

They survived the “very bad” drought of 1917 and 1918 early in their ranching life in West Texas.

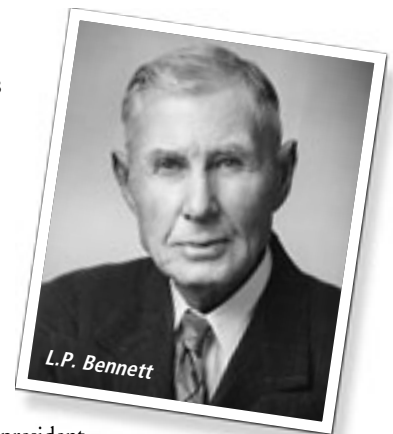
And in 1935 a bank in Lubbock and a finance company in Fort Worth ordered the sale of 8,320 acres of their land to repay loans of thousands of dollars they had used to buy cattle.

L.P. and Ruth Bennett prayed and persisted, however. And because of their determination, their belief in Christian education, and the discovery of oil on their ranch four days before bank foreclosure, millions of dollars were added to the endowment of Abilene Christian.

Orphaned before the age of 10 and lacking even a day of formal education, Bennett overcame those and other setbacks, owned hundreds of cattle and a ranch of 18,560 acres in Yoakum County, served as vice president of the ACU Board of Trustees when the college first became accredited in 1951, and sent six of his eight children to Abilene Christian.

Hall of Fame coach A.M. “Tonto” Coleman (’28) in 1957 called Bennett “the greatest man I ever knew” and “my greatest inspiration.” Pepperdine University president M. Norvel Young (’36) wrote in 1953 that Bennett was “one of the most remarkable characters that I know.” Family memoirs refer to Bennett as “a Texas pioneer with an exceptional life.”

President Morris added, “The college has had no better friends than Mr. and Mrs. Bennett. They visualized the value of the school years ago



L.P. Bennett



L.D. “Bill” Hilton (center) hired Dub and Paulette Etheredge in 1984 to manage the Masten Ranch. Now vice president emeritus for finance and administration, Hilton has worked with ACU’s ranch and oil properties for more than 30 years.

GERALD EWING

“The weather determines everything I do,” Dub said. “It’s hard to plan anything because of our dependence on the weather. These have been wonderful years, but we’ve fought a critical drought for the last 10 years. The prairie chicken has disappeared, and the quail are about gone. There’s a shortage of good, fresh water.

It’s a precious commodity we’ll run out of one of these years.”

They have a 300-foot well near their home for fresh water, but Dub says it now holds only about five feet of water.

The amount of rainfall and grass determine the number of cattle kept on the ranch near the New Mexico border. They currently run about 500 cows, not counting calves, bulls and a few horses. They’ve had as many as 1,300 cows in the past.

Most calves on the ACU ranch are born in late fall so that means there’s branding for Dub, Paulette and their neighbors to do about January. “We use a year brand and a company brand,” he explains. “Most of these cows know me because I feed them. I’ve raised their mamas and grandmamas.” He spends hours on horseback (“I don’t drive unless I have to”) riding the ranch looking for problems to solve. “Most of the horses I ride, I raise,” he said. “You can’t buy a good ranch horse anymore. These days the horses that are good, people are using them.”

There may be fences to repair, windmills and livestock watering

and have helped materially in its development. They have been the kind of genuine Christian citizens that have made West Texas.”

Lucius Payne Bennett was born Sept. 21, 1874, in Conway, Ark. His mother died when he was 7, and his father, Millard Filmore Bennett, a doctor who caught typhoid fever from one of his patients, died when L.P. was 9.

When L.P. was 13 he rode a train from Arkansas to Wichita Falls to live near his older sister, Allie, and he found work on a large ranch. He later became ranch foreman, and he met and was married on Dec. 21, 1898, in Munday to Flora Ruth Smith, also the child of a physician.

Ruth’s father, Dr. John Robert Smith, helped the Bennetts get their start in ranching. L.P. and several other cowhands moved 500 head of Smith’s Hereford cattle from Knox County to Yoakum County, where he had staked a claim in 1914 in open cattle country where only some lonesome cowboys and a few homesteaders lived.

In 1918 the Bennetts moved into Smith’s ranch house in Yoakum County. The big house had dormer windows looking out from each side of the second story and was “a beautiful house for those early days on the Texas plains.” It featured high ceilings and a long hall that connected five bedrooms with the living and dining areas.

Wind whistled through cracks and under windows, and Ruth dreaded dusting and cleaning after a West Texas sandstorm. In the Bennett memoirs, Becki Bennett Schwarz says it was even “gritty between the teeth.”

A big, wood-burning stove with warming ovens in the sides provided heat in the winter. Ruth, described as a “sweet and kind” woman, cooked for her growing family and was “always actively on the lookout for people who needed help.”

There were no schools, churches, telephones or banks in the county that was recently inhabited solely by Comanche Indians. The Bennetts knew only isolation, privation and sometimes starvation. “There were times when there was not enough money to buy a stamp to send for money,” L.P. remembered.

L.P. and Ruth often told friends that they just read their Bible, learned what they should do, and sent for a preacher to baptize them. L.P.’s brother, Herbert, had taught him to read and write, and his parents had left him a book of sermons by restoration preacher Ashley S. Johnson.

They inherited land and bought other land at \$2-3 an acre. Someone remarked that “it certainly looked like two- or three-dollar land.”

With sparse rainfall on the plains, the sandy soil produced catclaw shrubs, mesquite trees, shin oak, yucca, cactus, and various types of grasses. The slaughter of the buffalo by the 1870s, the inventions of the windmill and barbed wire, and the coming of the railroad hastened the arrival of the ranching and cattle industries.

A cheerful man with pale, aged skin, L.P. was never far from a red Folger’s coffee can to spit tobacco juice. “Everyone called him Papa,” Schwarz wrote, and he had a sweet, bony face.

He knew “it would not be easy to give his children a good education in that unsettled part of Texas.” Schwarz, a granddaughter of L.P. and Ruth, wrote, “Papa must have often felt his disadvantage in living in a world of greater and greater literacy.”

He employed a tutor to live with the family and teach in the ranch’s small camp house a mile from their home. Ruth sent the children off to school each morning with their lunch buckets

packed with biscuits and fried quail or sausage, but the children looked forward to branding day because that meant they didn’t have to go to school.

Later a caliche road led across a cattle guard to a farm-to-market highway. They moved to Lubbock in 1924 and Abilene in 1927 so the family could live together while the older children attended high school and college. Hugh and Ralph, who both later became championship rodeo cowboys, were members of the ACU class of 1930. Following them were Katherine (’36), Alla Ruth (’37), Margaret (’40) and Gene (’43).

L.P. traveled between the ranch and Abilene in those years, leasing land and running his own cattle. In the summers the family lived on the ranch.

In Abilene they lived on Sayles Boulevard near the campus on North First Street until 1929, when they moved northeast to Abilene Heights near the new campus. There were only “four or five houses there then.”

Without money to pay many of their bills, including tuition, the Bennetts donated two sections of land to the college as a trade for their children’s tuition.

The arrival of the Depression later in 1929 caused more hardships. Schwarz, writing in “Bennett – A Texas Family” (1991), said, “The bottom fell out of the economy, and everyone just went broke.” The *Fort Worth Star-Telegram* reported in 1935 that Bennett’s loans from the Agricultural Livestock Finance Corp. of Fort Worth and First National Bank of Lubbock to purchase cattle came due. Since land had been used as collateral, the lenders advertised the sale of 8,320 acres for Oct. 1, 1935.

A few nights before the scheduled sale, Bennett and another ACU trustee, J.E. McKinzie, talked all night and prayed “that something would happen to save the ranch.”

The next day, Sept. 27, 1935, a drilling rig on their ranch struck oil. Schwarz writes that Bennett made a call from Abilene to the general store in Plains and learned “that they were almost to payday.” Schwarz’s father Gene remembered, “When Papa heard that it was a gusher, he threw his 10-gallon hat in the air and whooped.”

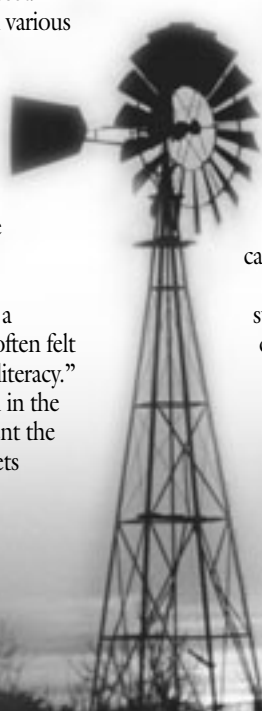
With this discovery, the great Wason Oil Field was tapped, and it proved to be one of the largest in the world. *The Lubbock Avalanche Journal* said Yoakum County was the top oil producing county in the nation for several years.

The Bennett family didn’t go from “rags to riches” overnight, but they were relieved to learn they could keep the ranch. In 1982 a historical marker was erected to mark the first oil well in Yoakum County that saved the Bennetts and launched another industry.

Schwarz called it a “a gift to get to grow up in the relative isolation of the West Texas plains... I loved to take long walks by myself out in the pastures. It was quiet except for the locusts and the distant thump of an oil pump. The sky and horizon went on forever. I loved the different colors of the sand, the clay earth and grasses. Each valley was our very own secret place that we shared with the ghosts of ancient Indians who surely made their camps there long ago.”

In addition to providing for his family, L.P. became an ardent supporter and friend of the college and Churches of Christ. He built a church building on the ranch, and he helped finance the first church building in Denver City in 1941 and a new building for the College Church of Christ in Abilene.

L.P. and Ruth were among the first major donors to ACC. A college report in 1941 said the Bennetts were “frequent visitors



on the campus. Their happy, unassuming manner endears them to students and faculty alike. Each freshman class soon learns to know and love them.”

The college named its new gymnasium in honor of the family. “Bennett Gymnasium was the largest gym anywhere around there,” Gene explained. “We just lived in that gym when we lived up there on the Hill. That was all that little kids had to do.”

Bennett moved back to Plains in 1939 and was elected to the ACU Board in 1940. He became Board vice president in 1947, and in 1948 when portraits of L.P. and Ruth were presented to the college, president Morris noted that “they have given more to ACC than any other two in the history of the school.”

Before Ruth’s death in 1949 at the age of 68, they had donated a total of 1,603 acres plus mineral rights. Published reports said there were as many as 170 producing oil wells on the Bennett land. The college sold the surface about 10 years ago but still has the mineral rights.

“Ruth and I have invested in bonds, stocks, cattle and lands, but the greatest investment we ever made was in Abilene Christian College,” Bennett said. When he went to the hospital before his death Nov. 10, 1956, a letter left in his typewriter added, “What better service can we render than make it possible that our young men and women can develop their hearts and minds for a life of Christian service.”

He told Young, “I firmly believe the more we give to God, the more He makes us able to give.”

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EDWARDS RANCH

No trade secrets, no fancy formulas, no complicated business theories for William M. Edwards. He used just plain old hard work and few words to build his ranching empire in West Texas.

President Morris described the colorful rancher as “one of the last of the men of the true West.”

Get out of bed early, work long and hard, improve the mind by reading, go to bed early.

That was the routine for Bill Edwards for more than 50 years starting in 1905 when he first drifted into the Fort Stockton area with

some sheep from Del Rio.

Up seven days a week at dawn, Edwards slipped into his boots, braced

himself with a cup of coffee, pulled on

his legendary battered hat, and moved briskly to the barn to saddle up. By the time the sun came over the rocky,

sparsely-vegetated hills surrounding his house, Edwards had summoned his ranch foreman and cowpokes for a briefing on the day’s work ahead.

That might include breaking or shoeing horses, branding or shearing sheep, riding fences, cutting sotol, or digging out dog-pen in the interest of his stock. And Edwards didn’t quit once he assigned chores. He usually rode along, supervising, surveying, lending a hand when necessary, and writing notes on the brim of his hat.

“Sometimes he will work five or six months solid without letting up,” ranchhand Nieves Subia said, “then maybe he won’t work so hard for a few weeks, but he’s soon back working again.”

Even into his 70s Edwards was hale, hardy and happy. A bachelor, he usually returned home each day by 1 p.m. after seven to eight hours of ranching for lunch, reading and a nap. He had a large library ranging from the classics to Zane Grey novels and magazines such as *Saturday Evening Post*, *National Geographic* and *Literary Digest*.

Late afternoons were spent doing odd jobs around the ranch headquarters or tending to his horses before retiring for the evening. He often packed a bedroll on his horse each morning not knowing where night might find him. Frequently he camped overnight in some far corner of his ranch in Terrell and Pecos Counties (the ranch extended as far as 16 miles east-to-west and nine miles north-to-south).

Modern comforts meant nothing to Edwards even after buying land with a large, 12-room rock house once valued at \$225,000. For the first two years, it was lighted only by lanterns. He didn’t care to spend the money to extend REA lines to the house.

“It wasn’t economical,” he explained, “and lanterns had done the job well for me in the past.”

But he spared no penny for his sheep and cattle, feeding them expensive mixtures of grain and meal along with oats. He preferred riding horseback to driving one of his four pickup trucks. He did have a telephone but used it only once a year to call for a truck from Fort Stockton or Sanderson to come for the wool from his sheep.

Edwards was born Jan. 29, 1876, in Spicewood in Burnet County. He moved to Paint Rock in 1884 and lived there until 1904 before leaving for the Trans-Pecos area with 1,500 head of sheep. He began buying land, mostly paying cash, and by the 1950s he had accumulated 65.5 sections, all of which he deeded Dec. 15, 1954, to Abilene Christian after becoming a friend of Morris and Sherrod.

Once when someone suggested he donate cattle and sheep to the college, Edwards said, “If I ever do anything for the college, it will be more than that.”

At one time, he owned one of the largest herds of sheep in Texas, including about 8,500 ewes. Edwards also ran about 100 cows and 1,000 Spanish goats. *West Texas Livestock Weekly* reported that Sanderson Wool Commission Co. handled some of Edwards’ wool clips of 75,000 to 100,000 pounds each.

For all of his wealth, he lived a life of simplicity. No movies, no television. One of his business partners claimed to have seen Edwards only three times in 12 years. A “neighbor” who lived 16 miles from ranch headquarters said he saw Edwards only three times in 20 years.

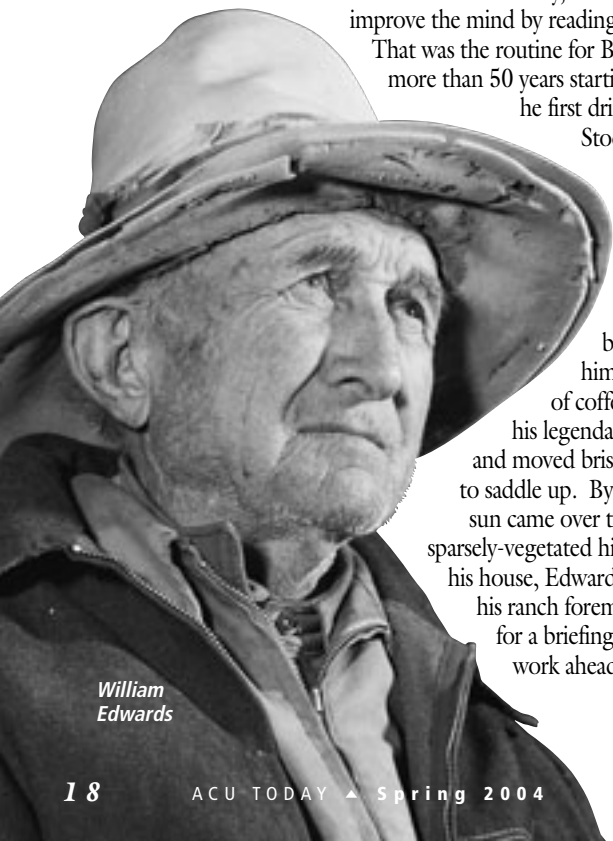
“I guess I go to town three to four times a year,” Edwards said.

His ranch of 41,839 acres, located about 50 miles southeast of Fort Stockton, included 18 windmills to grace the terrain, and four Mexican families lived on the ranch and worked for Edwards.

Houston Burcham of Fort Stockton introduced Edwards to Morris and Sherrod in 1947. “He was the friendliest fellow you ever met,” Morris said of Edwards. “Not a backslapper, but just sincere.”

When Morris and Sherrod first arrived at the ranch to meet Edwards, they found the small, weather-beaten man with a kind face and soft voice sitting under a chinaberry tree. “I have read of the Charter Oak in Connecticut, a shrine of liberty,” Morris once said, “but for Abilene Christian College I’ll take that chinaberry tree in Pecos County where we first shook hands with William M. Edwards on that sunny afternoon.”

Despite numerous invitations, including a ceremony at Homecoming



William Edwards

in 1955 to officially open Edwards Hall, a dormitory for men named for him, Edwards never visited campus. He told well-known writer Frank X. Tolbert of the *Dallas Morning News* in 1956, "I don't guess I'll get down to Abilene. Never have been there. I go to church once in a while (the closest church building was 50 miles away), but I don't belong to the Church of Christ.

"I gave the land to ACC because it looks to me as if they have a program which will produce good citizens," Edwards said.

At the time, it was the largest gift in the history of the college, and its value eventually reached into the millions of dollars and sparked a period of brilliant growth on campus. Today the university leases the surface to a nearby landowner to raise sheep and cattle, and ACU's rights to oil and gas continue to produce revenue for the university.

"The Edwards ranch has been a boon to Abilene Christian College," Morris said.

The ranch foreman for many years, Clarence Jessup, died in 1991. ACU's Bill Hilton continues to care for Jessup's widow, Vera, who lives in a nursing home in Abilene.

Edwards suffered a stroke in 1958 and died June 9, 1959, in a hospital in Fort Stockton at the age of 83. His nephews and nieces wanted the property, causing Abilene Christian to file a suit in district court in Fort Stockton for possession.

"Because he (Edwards) was dead, the college had a moral obligation to defend his right to do what he had wanted to do with his property," Stevens wrote in his book, "No Ordinary University." "This was a lesson not lost for others who had in mind willing or deeding estates to ACC. It helped them know that, after they were gone, the college would be faithful in trying to see that their decisions would be respected."

After two lengthy trials at the Pecos County Courthouse (the first ended in a hung jury), a verdict was reached that Edwards was sane at the time he deeded the ranch to Abilene Christian, but that college officials had used "undue influence" on Edwards.

The Court of Civil Appeals in El Paso reversed that decision, however, and said the college owned the land because there was no evidence of undue influence sufficient to support the jury's verdict. The Supreme Court of Texas refused to hear the case because it found no reversible error in the action of the court in El Paso.

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GARDNER RANCH

Born in Tennessee in 1888 in a family of 16 children, Felix Emerson Gardner bought his first farm in rural Texas at the age of 19.

He sold it two years later for a profit of \$1,860 and embarked on an amazing career as a salesman and investor.

"I've never been broke since," he said later in life. "Been battered a little bit, but never broke." His first sales job? Selling ironing boards.

He also sold insurance ("I've gone home many a night with my coat pockets full of money just from initiation fees") and Michelin tires (he led the nation one year in Michelin sales), operated an independent oil business, owned and managed dairy farms, and successfully worked in real estate. "I expect I've sold 75 or 100 farms in my lifetime," he said in 1961.

His wife, the former Sarah Martelia Hastings, whom he married in 1912 in Granbury, said, "I've heard him talk to people and wonder why they would buy anything from him. But pretty soon they take a dozen of this and a dozen of that.

"Why, he could get out there and make a living by starting with nothing but a pocket knife," she laughed. "I think the secret is that he never ran down his competitors."

And F.E. and Martelia never forgot about worthy causes for their money. "The Lord gave it to me," he once said, "and I'm just giving it back."

His wife said he often helped people in their hometown of Cleburne buy homes who otherwise could not. "He let people move in, pay nine or 10 months rent, and count this as a down payment on the house," she explained. "And nobody knows it but those he's helped."

They lived in Abilene in 1925-28, attended College Church of Christ, and became acquainted with ACC.

"I believe in Christian education," she said. "I think we need much more of it than we have. If the world ever did need anything, it needs Christian education."

President Morris added, "These scholarships will do much to assist worthwhile students who are preparing themselves to preach the Gospel and who otherwise would not attend ACC. We appreciate a great deal the interest that these people have in the college and in our students."

In 1957 the couple gave the college a 440-acre farm in Navarro County near Frost. The gift was used as endowment for the south wing of Hardin Administration Building, which at the time was the next building in the college's expansion program.

"The Lord has been so good to us that I think it is nothing but our duty to pass on our goods to help others," Mrs. Gardner said.

Then in 1960 they deeded to the college 5,395 acres of land in Andrews County, which at the time was one of the largest and most promising gifts in the college's history. There were more than 100 producing oil wells on the property.

"Only the good Lord who put the oil in the ground knows how much this land is really worth," Gardner added. "We think that Abilene Christian College is doing the best job we know of handling its finances and carrying out its purposes as a Christian college."

In 1961 Abilene Christian named Gardner Hall, a new dormitory for women, in honor of the couple whose gifts eventually amounted to millions of dollars. When it opened, Gardner Hall housed 352 students and was the largest building on campus.

"Mr. and Mrs. Gardner are among the best friends Abilene Christian College ever had," Morris said. "If it had not been for this marvelous gift of this ranch, we could not have gone ahead in the building of Gardner Hall. It is an honor to the college to have this new girls' dormitory named for such fine people."

She told friends, "I have no children of my own, but I have over 300 daughters who live in Gardner Hall."

The university still owns the Gardner ranch and retains mineral rights to most of the land. The surface is leased to a nearby landowner.

Gardner died in 1964 in Cleburne at the age of 75, his wife died in 1965, also in Cleburne, at the age of 76, and they made additional estate gifts to the university. F.E. never finished high school, and Martelia attended Thorp Spring Christian College.

Asked before his death about the reasons for his success in life, he responded, "Just the Lord and hard work." ▲



F.E. and Martelia Gardner