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By JESSICA CRAWFORD

Hitch Enterprises was born in the heart of a man simply looking for a better life. When James C. Hitch left Tennessee to seek out work, not only did he find his niche, what would become an empire in No Man's Land was set in motion. More than 125 years and six generations later, the Hitch family is a vital part of not only the Oklahoma Panhandle, but the cattle industry as a whole.

“James, this would have been late 1870s early '80s, he was a young man and he couldn't find any work,” Hitch Enterprises President Chris Hitch said. “I guess all of the guys were. The Civil War had ended recently and all the military guys were back. Plus, the south had been pretty beat up. Since he was having trouble finding work, he left.”

James C. Hitch ended up in Missouri where he met a man that taught him the cattle business. Through this man, Henry Westmoreland, he also met the woman that would one day become his wife.

“In Missouri, he eventually hooked up with a guy and started running cattle,” Chris said. “They would push cattle out into the Kansas/Oklahoma area out here. They would graze them and then push them back. They would winter in Missouri. Eventually, he married the man’s daughter.”

Many may not be aware the Hitch family actually began farming and ranching in Seward County. Shortly thereafter, what would one day become Guymon, became the headquarters of the enterprise.

“Long story short, they settled first near Liberal and then moved to Guymon,” Chris said. “At the time, I don’t know if Liberal or Guymon were even here. Well, I know Guymon wasn’t. But up in Seward County is where our original farm is. Then shortly thereafter, they moved down here to the panhandle where our current ranch is now. We have been here ever since.”

James K. Hitch’s son, Henry, was next in line to take over the reins. However, it was Henry’s son, Henry Jr., or “Ladd,” that cracked the mold by breaking into the packing industry by way of the feedlot concept.

“Henry didn’t really change anything,” Chris said. “It was still the cow/calf type ranch then. Then his son, Ladd, he went out to California in the ’40s or ’50s and saw feedlots. He came back and wanted to start a feedlot. His dad didn’t want that, he didn’t think cattle could live like that. But Ladd was a pretty persistent guy and convinced him they needed to try it.”

Henry Hitch wasn’t convinced a feedlot would be an ideal situation for the family business. However, knowing his son would not be satisfied until he made the attempt, permission was granted. Ultimately, the second-rate land the feedlot was to be placed upon would turn out to be a perfect location.

“His father made him put the feedlot on some kind of crummy ground,” Chris said. “He didn’t want it to eat up their good grazing grass. Now that has been a blessing because it is on a caliche knob so the drainage is really good, and you don’t have a lot of soil – so you don’t have a lot of mud. You can clean the pens up when it rains and snows like we have had this winter.

That was maybe 5,000 head in the early '50s.

“From there, of course, the packing industry was still in Kansas City and the feedlots were developing out here in Texas, Oklahoma and Kansas,” he explained. “They shipped the cattle on rail cars to Kansas City where they killed them. Eventually, somebody had the bright idea of building a packing house next to the feedlot so you didn’t have to ship the cattle. As that packing industry moved closer to the feedyards, the feedyards grew in size.”



Ladd’s idea not only grew the original feedlot, but eventually spawned the placement of two more.

“Of course, we have grown now,” Chris said. “We have the original feedlot, which is now called Henry C. Hitch Feedlot, it is just south of Guymon and is still on much of our original property from back in the 1880s. Then we have one west of north of town about 10 or 15 miles, it is really closer to Optima. It is Hitch I, it is our largest feedyard. Henry C. has about 50,000 head capacity, Hitch I has about a 60,000 capacity. Then Hitch II, the closest town is actually Satanta, and it is probably about 45,000 head.”

With a mentality of “people that go to the meetings make the rules,” Ladd, his son, Paul, and grandsons, Jason and Chris were and are still very active in the cattle industry.

“Of course, my grandfather was active in the industry, he was one of the founding members of the Texas Cattle Feeder’s Association,” Chris said. “He was instrumental in the Oklahoma

Cattlemen's Association and has been active in the national organization since the inception. Of course, he was very political. He didn't ever serve, but loved politics. My dad was very much the same way. Now, since my dad has passed and Ladd's passed, it is my brother and I and my mom, Linda."

Since the passing of Paul Hitch in May of 2008, Jason and Chris Hitch stepped up to take over the driver's seat – together.

"I have a degree in animal science and a masters in physics," Chris said. "I have spent most of my time and most of my focus on production issues. Before I was president of the company, I kind of ran the feedyards. I don't have a lot of experience with hogs, none of us really do. By the time we got into the hog deal in the mid '90s, I was mostly done with college and starting on graduate school.

"Jason is kind of focused on the computer side," he continued. "Also, he has a law degree – he's a lawyer. So, between the two of us, we share a lot of the responsibilities. Technically, the organization requires that you have one president and one chairman of the board. So, we just farked and I am president and he is chairman of the board. We share everyday CEO duties. Really, it has been pretty good, both of us are very active in the industry. We both serve on several boards and committees. And part of that is, people that go to the meetings make the rules. Another part of it, I think, is just kind of good business sense to be part of the industry you are trying to support. Frankly, it is a lot of fun, I really enjoy it."

Not only has the Hitch family been extremely successful in the cattle business, when the hog farms hit the Oklahoma Panhandle, the family of visionaries got on board.

"Really, it has been a very interesting and fun ride, so far," Chris said. "It's been in the family for 125 years, passed down from father to son. My brother has one son, so we have our sixth generation. My wife and I don't have any children, yet. We have about 350 employees and have been here for about 125 years. We celebrated that this past summer."

Hitch Enterprises prides itself on treating employees like family. Chris, himself, understands the responsibility of providing for not only his own family, but the families of each and every individual employed by the company.

“We have 350 employees,” Chris said. “Of that, about 300 of them are in the Guymon area. They might be in Hooker, Goodwell, or Adams, or some of those little outlying communities. But, the majority of them are local people here. So, I think every job supports three or four people. Then you are talking about 1,200 potential people supported by this work. Some families are even larger, so it maybe more than that, I don’t know.”

“We try to have more of a relationship with our employees, we try more than maybe some of the companies in the area,” he added. “Do we get out to the feedlots everyday? No. But we do the best we can.”

As far as Chris is concerned, maintaining employees for a long period of time tends to be a blessing – and a curse.

“We have had some employees that have worked for us for over 35 years,” he said. “That is amazing. In fact, it is almost a little troubling because it is hard to replace those people. Even if you have hugely talented people, you lose a massive amount of experience and knowledge about the area. When they retire or leave, it is just really hard to replace them. But, at the same time, you really love the idea that you can have employees that will work for you for many years.”

When James K. Hitch handed the ranch over to his 17-year-old son, Henry, he could not have known how successful the trade he dearly loved would one day become for his family.

“I never had a lot of schooling,” Henry told the Living Legend Library of Oklahoma many years ago. “I guess that didn’t hurt me. Well, anyway, I would rather stay home and punch cows.”

The rest, is history.

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