

## Chapter 14

### The Jack & Myrhl Frost Ranches

White Hat Ranch, Blackwell, Nolan County, Texas 7,930 acres

Bandy Ranch, Rotan, Kent County, Texas 12,000 acres

Eskimo Ranch, Hereford, Deaf Smith County, Texas

Sierra Blanca in the Trans-Pecos, Hudspeth County, Texas 119,680 acres

Compared to the other ranchers in the Big Bend and Tran-Pecos areas, Jack Frost was a very different rancher. The best way to describe his character and abilities is that of a business executive that wore a white shirt and tie. His business interests were in many parts of Texas, New Mexico and the Rockies. The energetic Frost moved rapidly from one task to another and from one place to another. Time was of the essence and he was always racing the clock. So much so that in order to get everything done private airplanes and pilots were a necessity. Frost was first and foremost a successful oil man and being a cattle rancher was second. Everyone who lives in Texas knows that oil wells make more money than cows, but he was successful at both because he worked at it. One would have to assume that it was the money that drove his ambition.

Edward Leon “Jack” Frost was the son of Enoch Luther (E.L.) Frost (November 18, 1867 – December 8, 1933) and Bernice Caradine (November 24, 1874 – September 5, 1966). Jack was born March 26, 1900 in Greenville, Hunt County, Texas.<sup>1</sup> His father, Luther was listed as a local business person according to the *Greenville Harold Banner* and was said to be popular in the social circles of that city.<sup>2</sup> Luther and Bernice moved to Nolan, Nolan County, Texas in 1907 and purchased what was later to become the famous White Hat Ranch.<sup>3</sup>

Frost attended a few years of grade school in Greenville and between attending Hardin-Simmons University in Abilene, Texas and Southern Methodist University in Dallas he received his education in geology.<sup>4</sup> He was one of those people who put his education to very good use and excelled at whatever he did. He was later identified with most of the professional organizations of the petroleum industry was active in the many social clubs in Dallas, Midland and San Antonio. He was always an active member of the West Texas Geological Society and the South Texas Geological Society.<sup>5</sup>

While living in Dallas and going to SMU, Jack met Ina Myrhl Jiant (September 11, 1903 – July 4, 1991) of Palo Pinto, County, Texas. Myrhl grew up on a ranch outside of Palo Pinto and was very familiar with ranching and country life. They appeared to have common interests and were always socially active no matter where they were. Jack and Myrhl married in 1922 and their marriage produced one son, Robert Leon “Bobby” Frost.<sup>6</sup> Bobby did not seem to share his father’s enthusiasm for either the oil or cattle business. One would certainly suspect it was a disappointment to both parents.

Even though Frost attended two well respected universities and graduated from SMU there is almost no biographical information about his early professional career. Successful independent oilmen seem to *have a nose* of where to look and Frost possessed that skilled ability. He was that legendary type of Texas oilman who made his money from scratch and

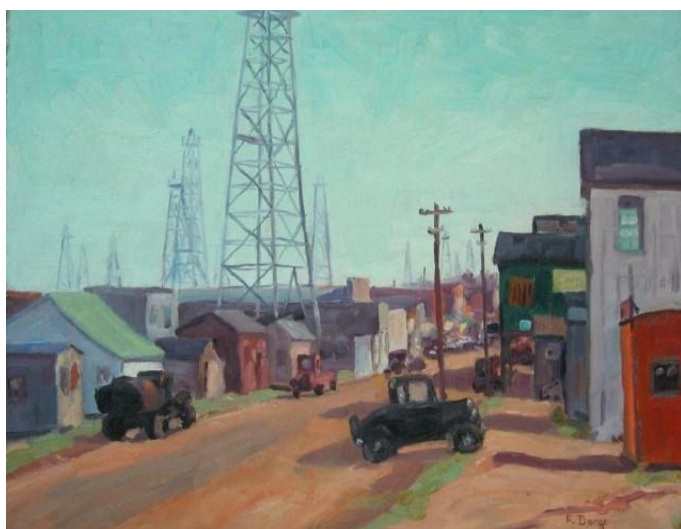


Rotary Drilling Rig, 20" x 24", Oil on Canvas, circa 1930's, Courtesy Dallas Auction Gallery 2015

found the scratching difficult in the early days.<sup>7</sup> Many oilmen are involved in partnerships to help spread the risk and insure adequate financial strength. Frost eventually partnered with D. Harold Byrd in 1931 to establish Byrd-Frost, Inc.<sup>8</sup> Byrd, a well-known and successful Dallas oil operator was known to have drilled 56 dry holes that produced no oil.

In the fall and winter of 1935, Byrd-Frost, Inc. leased 500,000 acres in western Nebraska. In March of 1936 they leased another 205,000 acres for a total of 705,000 acres. The Nebraska block assembled by D. Harold Byrd and Jack

Frost is believed to be the largest ever assembled by independent operators in the United States. It is also probably the largest ever leased by either a major or independent oil company in the country up to that time. Of the total acreage, the Magnolia Petroleum Company of Dallas bought half interest in 350,000 acres in the southern part of the block.<sup>9</sup> Magnolia Petroleum which was a subsidiary of Socony-Vacuum was later merged into Mobil Oil Corporation in 1959. Mobil Oil Corporation would later merge with Exxon Corporation on November 30, 1999 to form Exxon Mobil Corporation.<sup>10</sup>



Oil Town, 12" x 16", Oil on Canvasboard, circa late 1930's, Collection of Marc Bateman

In oil patch parlance, Byrd-Frost, Inc. didn't think in terms of gophers, they wanted elephants and they seemed to find their share. Their goal was to find and build steady production. Frost also bought small production companies by himself, independent of Byrd-Frost, Inc. An example would be Gibson Oil Corporation of Amarillo of which he purchased controlling interest in December of 1951. Gibson owned production in Gray, Hutchinson and San Patricio Counties totaling 120,000 barrels annually. It also owned gas systems, wells, transmission lines and distribution

in Claude, Groom and Goodnight, Texas.<sup>11</sup> Gibson may have been small by today's standards, but merging small, well run companies would eventually result in a larger company. His secret was tenacity, day after day. His *nose for oil* deals seemed to never take a vacation.

Jack and Myrhl moved to San Antonio in 1963 in order to be closer to the possibilities of a new petroleum province in the area west of that fast-growing city. Frost firmly believed in the deeper Ellenburger (a geological formation) prospects in Kinney, Val Verde, and other counties, and also shallower possibilities in the LaSalle and Dimmit area. The Frost field of east LaSalle County, a shallow Crocket sandstone field, was one of his local discoveries, but he also had drilled several deep wildcats on pioneering prospects. Additionally, Frost had production on his fee land in the Pecos area of West Texas, as well as producing leases in Ward County and around Sweetwater in Nolan County. Pioneer oilmen worthy of the title die still looking for oil and Jack Frost was no exception. Not every pioneer has discoveries to his credit to make his new hopes respected, but Frost was the exception.<sup>12</sup>

Over the years you have probably heard that famous Texas saying, "big hat, no cows". Well, Jack Frost not only had the big hat, but he also had the bank roll and plenty of cows and ranches for them to graze on. In all probability he did not even know how to spell the word "small" nor did he even want to know. He was happier with the word "big."

In Texas, it seems every oilman that enjoys any success in his business eventually buys a ranch. After all, that's what Texas is all about. The two go hand in hand. Jack Frost was no exception.

As was pointed out earlier in this chapter, Frost's parents, E. L. and Bernice Frost moved to Nolan County from Greenville, Texas in 1907 to become cattle ranchers. It is believed the Frost family briefly lived in the town of Nolan before settling permanently in a home physically located on the ranch. The unincorporated town of Nolan is somewhat noteworthy because it is situated at an elevation of 2,493 feet which so happens to be coincidental average elevation of the United States.<sup>13</sup>



Sign on Front Gate

Frost, having been raised and grown up on a ranch never lost his interest in ranching. So much so, that he became interested in all the attributes of pure breed Hereford cattle. He bought his first foundation stock in 1928 and placed on his parents White Hat Ranch.<sup>14</sup> It was the beginning of his other career that both he and Myrhl would enjoy tremendous success and notoriety. He was as attached to Hereford cattle as he was to barrels of oil. They made a good combination.

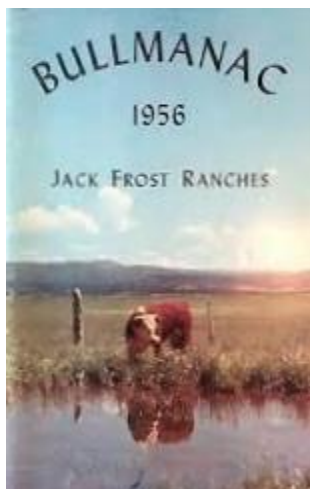
Frost's father, E. L. Frost unexpectedly died December 8, 1933. At some later date Jack and Myrhl bought the 7,930-acre White Hat Ranch from Jack's mother, Bernice. This was their first ranch and marks the beginning of the steady rise to fame of a West Texas cattle ranch that became known all over the southwest for its distinguished pure-bred Hereford cattle. This dynamic couple wasted no time in transforming the White Hat Ranch into one of the most lavishly appointed cattle ranches in West Texas.<sup>15</sup>



Mare and Colt, White Hat Ranch, Blackwell, 9 x 12, Oil on Canvasboard, Courtesy David Dike Fine Arts

The next ranch they purchased sometime in the early to mid-1930s was the 12,000-acre Bandy Ranch located along the Brazos River near Rotan in Kent County, approximately 53 miles north of the White Hat Ranch. Although the outstanding pure-bred Hereford breeding stock was located south at the White Hat Ranch, the larger Bandy Ranch was used for high grade commercial beef production for the “discriminating beef-eaters of the nation”.<sup>16</sup>

The Frosts wasted no time and began building a large ranching operation. As always, they hired knowledgeable and experienced cattlemen to help them move forward with their plan to create a brand of highly developed Hereford cattle that would be in demand. Hereford breeders are always diligently striving for stock that compliments their own herds. Jack and Myrhl realized they could not do it all themselves and in 1937 hired Perry E. Lunsford who would in time become general manager of all the Frost ranching operations.<sup>17</sup>



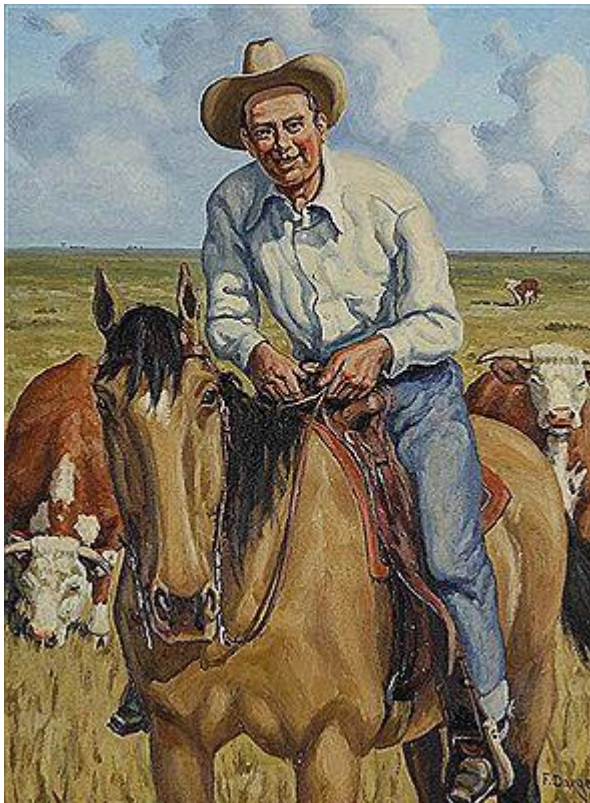
The Frosts created an annual publication titled *Bullmanac*, just like Almanac that was published under the banner of the Frost Ranches. It was unique and so well designed that it became a must-read publication for the Hereford cattle industry. This publication made a steady climb to a circulation of approximately 10,000 subscribers in a reasonable period of time. Hereford breeders who wanted to sell offspring production and didn't advertise in *Bullmanac* were at a disadvantage.

Between *Bullmanac* and Frost's reputation for the finest in pure breed Herefords, the White Hat Ranch developed a loyal and respected following. This ranch would become the go to place for other ranchers to buy their top of the line breeding stock. This was accomplished through annual auctions which to this day is still the avenue of marketing used by most ranchers. Any time the White Hat Ranch had an auction, liberal use was made of newspaper and livestock publication advertising. The December 1938 auction catalogue contained 138 pages and required 4,000 pounds of paper. The registered attendance was 1,790. This was the largest number of people known to be present at an event of this kind at

that time.<sup>18</sup> At the December 1939 Hereford auction, when the auctioneer checked the large crowd to see where everyone was from, there were 16 states represented outside the state of Texas and even one couple from South America.<sup>19</sup>

With the large attendance of these auctions held in West Texas, 223 miles from Dallas, one has to wonder where everyone stayed while visiting the White Hat Ranch. Sweetwater had just the place, The Bluebonnet Hotel was located 30 miles north of the ranch. Opened in May of 1928, this well-appointed hotel quickly became the social center of Nolan County and the surrounding area. The Bluebonnet went out of their way to accommodate the auctions at the White Hat Ranch and their many visitors. The Frost ranch was obviously good for business.

Longtime Sweetwater resident Charles Roberson, who worked at the hotel, remembers how, before World War II began, the White Hat Ranch held Hereford sales in Sweetwater, bringing to the Bluebonnet Hotel lots of out-of-town buyers. Concerning one of the grand champion Herefords, Roberson remembers, “they built a pen in the lobby of the hotel and had this bull in this pen right there in the lobby. During the Annual Rattlesnake Round-Up they had some of the snakes displayed there in the lobby, too.”<sup>20</sup>



**Cowboy of the Plains, Texas Panhandle, 16" x 20", Oil on Canvasboard, circa 1950's, Courtesy of David Dike Fine Arts 2013, Thought to be Eskimo Ranch,**

Sometime in the mid-1940s Jack and Myrhl added to their ranch holdings with the purchase of the Eskimo Ranch (acreage unavailable) located south east of Hereford, in the Texas Panhandle. Frost, being a practical person, named the new ranch in honor of the “blue norther” day on which he bought the spread. He commented, “it’s cold enough to freeze an Eskimo.” And the ranch has been called that ever since.<sup>21</sup> The Eskimo was very similar in operation to the Bandy, as it was a commercial cattle operation. The ranch was later sold in 1963 when the Frosts moved from Dallas to San Antonio to find more oil. The fact that it was out of the way from the other ranches was likely a major reason for the decision to sell.

In the spring of 1955, the Frosts acquired approximately 187 sections or 119,680 acres of land in Hudspeth County from William C. Lourcey and partners. Most of this land at one time comprised the former Jess M. Wallbridge ranch that was sold in approximately 1952 after Jess retired from ranching and moved back to Isleta, Texas to live full time.



**The Approaching Storm**, 18" x 24", Oil on Canvas, Courtesy Heritage Gallery 2012, thought to be Frost Ranch west of Sierra Blanca.

The ranch runs from west of the town of Sierra Blanca to close to the town of McNary with Highway 10 forming the southern border and extending about 15 miles north to the ghost town of Finlay. It is cut into two pasture sections by the Texas and Pacific Railroad. The Sierra Blanca area is good ranching country, but tough and mountainous with little water, little rainfall and ample grass when there is rain. It is a challenging and beautiful landscape, but is no place for weaklings, neither cattle or humans. Lourcey, a noted attorney and oilman of Fort Worth, and his partners purchased the land for hunting. Since Frost

was a deal maker, one would have to assume that the previous owners retained hunting rights and Frost was happy to raise cattle. Monroe Wallbridge, Jess Wallbridge's son continued to operate the ranch for the Frosts.<sup>22</sup> Mr. Lourcey and several other ranch owners each gave Mr. Wallbridge's son, Monroe Jess Wallbridge, \$2,500 for his college education. He acted as their guide on hunting trips.<sup>23</sup>



**Sierra Blanca & Finlay Mountain, Malone & Old Mex. Mtn. West TX**, 12" x 16", Oil on Canvasboard, circa middle 1950's, Courtesy of David Dike Fine Arts 2018.

As one can imagine, Jack Frost was also an active lifetime member of the Texas Hereford Association that was founded in 1899. He served as president of the association in 1943 and 1944 and was so active the headquarters were moved to Dallas. The City of Fort Worth and the owner of the Fort Worth Star Telegram, Amon G. Carter were not pleased with the relocation at all. The late Tom G. Paterson was secretary of the association during Frost's first term as president. The association ran into financial difficulties due to a combination of uncontrollable circumstances

and no one will ever know just how much of his own money Frost put into the association to keep it functioning.<sup>24</sup> Frost was also a member of the Texas and Southwest Cattle Raisers Association for 35 years and served as a director for 17 years.<sup>25</sup>

While Jack Frost was continuously drilling for oil, at the same time he and Myrhl were buying ranches and raising top of the line pure breed Herefords, Fred Darge kept busy painting West Texas and the Trans-Pecos area. Darge was a favorite of the ranchers around the Sierra Blanca area. From studying the verso of many of his paintings, Darge spent a great deal of time in that area and produced numerous paintings from many locations. He was always a welcome visitor to the Ed Love and Walbridge ranches.

When Frost came into the area, the two developed a warm friendship. Darge was given carte blanche to all the Frost ranches. Frost told Darge he would buy all the paintings he was unable to sell.<sup>26</sup> This is in addition to the paintings Darge gave to the Frosts as a visitor in return for room and board as he had for the other ranchers. It has been assumed that this arrangement was not necessary between Frost and Darge. The Depression and World War II were over and times were different. The fact both made their homes in Dallas added to their abiding friendship.

There was no better place to display Fred Darge's many artistic skills than Lubbock, Texas close to the heart beat of West Texas and Panhandle ranching country. In November of 1960, the West Texas Museum's Rotund Gallery presented an exhibit of West Texas ranch life by Fred Darge. Twenty-three oil paintings of the "White Hat," "Bandy" and "Sierra Blanca" ranches owned by Mr. and Mrs. Jack Frost of Dallas were shown from their extensive art collection. The paintings show the animals, men, horses, watering places and landscapes of their well-known spreads. A group of Darge's work on the Palo Duro area and of other West Texas ranches will also be shown in this comprehensive portrayal of "ranch country."<sup>27</sup>

It would be easy to continue on with the phenomenally interesting story of Jack and Myrhl Frost if it were not for the fact this book is really about Fred Darge. Darge had a knack for finding interesting people and places to paint no matter where he went. That is what is so interesting about Texas, no matter where you go there are always many more stories like the Frosts. If ever there was a land of opportunity, many Texans surely considered their great state ground zero and the starting point of opportunity. People such as the Frosts built thriving businesses and supported these artists who enhance life by assembling collections of their works a legacy for the future.