

THE BLACKBURN EFFECT

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Article by Frank Holmes

Photos courtesy of Ted and Carolyn Ressler

A half-century ago, a bold move on the part of a North Dakota horseman resulted in the introduction of a vaunted performance line to the Northern Plains.

In the late 1950s, Harold Schafer of Bismarck, N.D., decided to get into the Quarter Horse business. Schafer was a talented businessman whose Gold Seal Company was responsible for such products as Snowy Bleach™, Mr. Bubble™ and Glass Wax™.

When it came to establishing a Quarter Horse breed program, however, Schafer was quick to realize that he was going to need some help. So he turned to Ted Ressler of Mandan, N.D. - one of the best-known horsemen in the state - for help.

The results of this shrewd move was the establishment of one of the most unique programs of its day - the Blackburn Ranch - and the introduction of a line of horses to the Northern Plains that remains very much a part of the regional scene.

And, although Schafer was definitely the "money" behind the operation, Ressler was the master planner.

THE RIGHT MAN FOR THE JOB

Ted Ressler was born on November 17, 1929, on a farm 20 miles southwest of Mandan. Growing up in an age when "horsepower" was not just a word but a way of life, Ressler learned to handle horses at an early age.

When he was 18-years-old, he went to work for legendary rodeo contractor Leo Cremer of Big Timber, Mont. "My job was to take care of the pickup horses," Ressler says, "and Leo also gave me a three-year-old filly to train in my spare time."

After leaving Cremer's employ, Ressler went to work for Jerry Boren of Mandan, N.D. Then, in 1950, the Korean War broke out and the 21-year-old was drafted into the service in 1951. Returning home in 1953, he was married to Carolyn in 1956.

The young couple exchanged their vows in Las Vegas and then spent part of their honeymoon looking at horses. During a visit to the Spanish Springs Ranch of Reno, Nev., they happened upon a weanling colt named Poco Eagle that would soon find his way to North Dakota.

"Around this same time," Ressler says, "Punch Oglesby of Jonesboro, Texas, brought a stud named Motor Scooter up to some of the first North Dakota Quarter Horse shows. Between Punch and his wife, Faye, they won about everything at the shows. This made an impression on me and

I set my sights on getting a horse of similar breeding. And this is how I came to get 'Eagle.'"

Poco Eagle, a 1956 brown stallion by Poco Rey and out of Scar Face S., was a maternal half-brother to Scooter S. Although he was injured as a young horse and consequently never ridden, he did go on to become a multiple AQHA Champion sire.

One year after getting Poco Eagle home, Ted Ressler went to work for Harold Schafer, and the Blackburn Ranch was born.

A BROODMARE SIRE SUPREME

From a horse standpoint, the Blackburn story rightfully begins with a stallion that antedates the registry by several decades. Yellow Jacket, a 1908 red dun stallion by Little Rondo and out of Barbee Dun, was a famous early-day racehorse and longtime sire for the renowned Waggoner Ranch of Vernon, Texas. W. T. Waggoner purchased the stallion in 1916. After utilizing him as a herd sire for eight years, he gave him to Lee Bivins of Amarillo, Texas.

In 1926, Bivins bred the then 19-year-old stallion to five mares belonging to Edgar Thomas of Stinnett, Texas. The next spring, four colts

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and a filly were born. Of the quartet of foals, three would go on to become top sires in their own right.

Cowboy P-12, a 1927 chestnut stallion of Roan Lady, sired the world champion runners Hard Twist and Shue Fly. Yellow Boy P-18, a 1927 dun stallion out of Bonnie Wilkins, was the main herd sire on the famed JA Ranch of Paducah, Texas, for years.

Blackburn, a 1927 dun stallion by Yellow Jacket and out of Siss, is officially recorded as being bred by J. L. Fuqua Jr of Amarillo. Edgar Thomas did in fact breed Blackburn; Fuqua was simply the owner at the time of registration.

Regardless of who the breeder was, it is a matter of fact the Waggoner Ranch acquired Blackburn from Fuqua when he was seven- or eight-years-old. The stallion's first registered foals were born in 1933 and his first Waggoner-bred foals in 1936.

AQHA records show that Blackburn sired 168 registered foals. Among his better-known sons were Red Waggoner, a performance Register of Merit (ROM) qualifier; Buster Waggoner, a performance ROM qualifier and NCHA earner of \$1,660; and Evans' King Edwards, owned by Will Evans of Tatum, Okla.

Evans, a well-known Sooner State horseman and deputy sheriff of the all-black community of Tatum, was the illegitimate son of W. T. Waggoner - and therefore a half-brother to E. Paul and Electra Waggoner. But this is another story altogether.

Getting back to Blackburn, he quickly made his mark on the Waggoner Ranch breeding program - not as a sire of sons, but as a sire of broodmares. Bred to such "generation next" Waggoner sires as Pretty Buck and Poco Bueno, the Blackburn mares produced such outstanding cutting and show horses as Snipper W - 1953 NCHA World Champion Cutting Horse; Poco Mona - 1958 NCHA World Champion Cutting Mare; and Poco Lynn - 1958 High Point Halter Horse.

In addition, the Blackburn daughters produced such Waggoner Ranch-bred AQHA Champions as Snipper W, Poco Mona, Poco Bay, Poco Doll, Poco Nadine, Poco Robin, Poco Bob, Poco Lynn, Buck Deuce, Poco Pico, Poco Speedy and Strummer.

Midway through the 1948 breeding season, the Waggoner Ranch sold Blackburn - then 19-years-old - to the Cowan Ranch of Seymour, Texas. The stallion's last full foal crop would hit the ground in 1950, with single foals born in 1953 and 1955.

By the late 1950s and early 1960s, Blackburn was the leading maternal grandsire of AQHA

Champions and one of the breed's over-all top broodmare sires. And it is for this reason that Harold Schafer and Ted Ressler decided not only to build their breeding operation upon the blood of the renowned stallion, but to name it after him as well.

THE BLACKBURN RANCH

"I had gotten interested in the Blackburn mares several years before I went to work for Harold," Ressler says. "I had even made a trip to Texas in search of some of them. It had been proven by such top breeders as the Waggoner Ranch and Paul Curtner that the cross of Poco Bueno stallions on the Blackburn mares was a winner, and this is what I wanted to bring to the North Country."

Beginning in 1958, Ressler went about quietly buying all of the Blackburn mares that he could locate. Treks to the Waggoner and Cowan Ranches netted numerous mares, as did visits to Paul Curtner of Jacksboro, Texas; Wilbur Lecklider of Kingman, Kan.; and the G. W. Sams Estate, Fort Worth, Texas, resulted in the purchase of several additional Blackburn mares. These mares were in foal to such noted stallions as Poco Pine, Poco Mos and Poco Birthday.

"There have been numerous stories told in print about how I came to bring all the Blackburn mares to North Dakota," Ressler says. "Some



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of these accounts are not 100 percent accurate. I was able to buy 49 Blackburn mares for the ranch. This is the total and I have the names of each and every one of these mares.

"One account stated that all the mares I got from Paul Curtner had Poco Pine foals at side and all were bred back to him; this is not true. Some did have foals at side, and some were bred back - but not all of them.

"Another story says some of the Curtner mares were hauled to Kansas to be bred to Poco Birthday. Again, this is inaccurate. In 1960, I bought several Blackburn daughters from Wilbur Lecklider of Kingman, and they were already bred to Poco Birthday. One of the mares I bought in Kansas was Waggoner II, the dam of two AQHA Champions - Lecklider's Little Buck and Corky Waggoner. She was 17-years-old when I bought her, and she wound up producing five foals that were born on the Blackburn Ranch."

It was at the Sams Estate dispersal sale in the fall of 1961 that Ressler and Schafer were able to buy the legendary Pretty Buck - a 1942 dun stallion by Pretty Boy and out of a mare by Buck Thomas - and install him as the Blackburn Ranch's senior sire.

As the sire of the Snipper W - the world champion cutting horse - and the earners of nine AQHA Champions, four Superior Halter awards, two Superior performance awards and 30 performance ROMs, Pretty Buck was arguably the highest profile stallion to stand in North Dakota up to this time.

Joining Pretty Buck as part of the Blackburn Ranch stallion battery was Poco Nino, a 1956

Photo Captions:

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1. Ted Ressler talks E. Paul Waggoner as Fagan Miller holds Poco Mos at Santa Rosa in 1960.

2. Ted Ressler with Mr. Blackburn 40.

3. Ted Ressler and Pretty Buck in 1960.

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4. Ted Ressler and Mr. Blackburn 28 in 1964.

5. Ted Ressler and Poco Bueno in 1960.

6. Mares on the Waggoner Ranch in 1960.

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buckskin stallion by Poco Bueno and out of Patsy Buck by Pretty Buck. With Ressler's Poco Eagle also in use as a breeding horse, the ranch was set up to give a big boost to the genetic base of the North Country Quarter Horse.

Pretty Buck's first North Dakota foal crop hit the ground in 1963 and from it would come the AQHA Champions Mr Blackburn 37 - a 1963 dun gelding out of Lady Black by Blackburn; and Mr Blackburn 40 - a 1963 bay stallion out of Lady Cowan by Blackburn.

As outstanding a set of horses as the ranch's first Pretty Buck crop represented, it was far from the operation's only contributions to the breed. Over the course of a near decade - from 1961 through 1969 - the following Blackburn-bred horses made their mark as performers: Mr Blackburn 16 - 1961 dun gelding by Poco Mos x Lady Black 119 - AQHA Champion; Mr Blackburn 28 - 1962 bay stallion by Poco Eagle x May Blackburn - AQHA Champion and Superior Halter; and Mr Blackburn 88 - 1967 dun stallion by Mr Blackburn 40 x Vinita Kay - Superior Western Pleasure (138 points).

In addition, Blackburn 28 - 1962 bay mare by Poco Nino x Lady Black 62; Blackburn 77 - 1966 black mare by Poco Eagle x Lady Cowan 1; Mr Blackburn 57 - 1964 palomino gelding by Poco Nino x Lady Cowan 10; Mr Blackburn 62 - 1964 bay gelding by Poco Eagle x Lady Cowan 4; and Mr Blackburn 110 - 1969 brown gelding by Mr Blackburn 71 x Lady Cowan 9; all earned performance ROMs.

Mr Blackburn 101, a 1968 bay stallion by Mr Blackburn 40 and out of Poco Pepsi, is another stallion worthy of mention. An AQHA Champion himself, he went on to sire such

top performers as Debonaire Lady - Superior Halter (Open and Youth), Youth Superior Showmanship, 598 halter and 215 performance points; Debonair Lass - AQHA Champion; Winmore Jack - Youth AQHA Champion, Youth Superior Western Pleasure and Showmanship, 81 halter and 261 performance points; Jackie Bee Slick - Superior Western Pleasure (Open and Youth); and Blackburns Peach - Youth Versatility award.

But the real value of the Blackburn breeding program - and the Blackburn horses - does not lie in the show realm; it lies instead on the infusion of powerful "working horse" genetics that it brought to the North Country.

Harold Schafer was in the financial position to go out and get any horses that he wanted; and Ted Ressler had the knowledge and determination to find and acquire the type of horses that he felt the ranch needed. As a result, the single-most impressive set of horses to ever be brought into the state of North Dakota came about. The effects of the operation are still being felt today.

A MODERN-DAY BLACKBURN BREEDER

Lynette Leier of Velva, N.D., has been a fan of the Blackburn horses for most of her life. In the early 1990s, with her late husband Les, she initiated a small breeding program based upon the performance family.

Mr Blackburn 945, a 1994 dun stallion by Fortys Last Chance and out of Blackburn Grullo Girl, heads the Leier program. A line-bred Blackburn Ranch descendant, he traces to Poco Bueno once, Pretty Buck twice and Blackburn four times.

As a performer, the 100 percent foundation Quarter Horse was the 1997 NDQHA Reining Champion and the 1997 Reining Futurity

Reserve Champion and the 2002 NDQHA Barrel Racing Champion. In addition, he has earned AQHA ROMs in reining, barrel racing, pole bending and Amateur working cow horse.

Retired to stud, he has sired such performers as Bergers Pride - the 2008 World Champion USTRC Heading Horse. Owned and ridden by Sid Ward of Idaho, the North Dakota ranch horse turned world champion won \$60,000 and a tractor at the USTRC Finals.

Lynette Leier is the quintessential small breeder who, operating oftentimes on the proverbial "shoestring," has nonetheless developed a market for her young horses that has seen them go to several states and countries.

And she is quick to point out that she owes much of her success to the vision that Ted Ressler had fifty years ago for a breeding program built around the blood of one great foundation sire.

It is a program that the North Dakota horse breeder, and many others just like her, find valid today and worthy of perpetuating. And they are all carrying on a family tradition that, for want of a better description, might simply be branded as "The Blackburn Effect." 🐾🐾

*Frank Holmes has been penning horse-related articles and books for more than 40 years. He has authored *The Hank Wiescamp Story* and co-authored *Legends 2 through 7 for Western Horseman*, and *Wire to Wire - the Walter Merrick Story*, *More than Color*, *Spotted Pride and King P-234* under his own banner. His most recent effort is *More than Color*, Vol. 2 for *Western Horseman*. Frank currently lives in Kiowa, Colo., with his wife Loyce. Visit www.loftent.com for more information.*

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