

MILTON ROBINOWITZ WAS COMPLETELY OUT OF THE CATTLE BUSINESS — once. Three weeks later, he was back at what he does best.

Partnering on Cattle

By ELLEN HUMPHRIES BRISENDINE

“... I INHERITED MORE PARTNERS
than most people dream about.”

When Milton Robinowitz stepped in to lead his family's businesses in the late 1940s, he inherited more partners than he could count. The Robinowitz family was involved in general stores, retail and grocery stores, cattle partnerships, cotton, rice, pecans and more.

He'd inherited these partners from his uncles Abe and Cecil and father Joe, Russian Jewish immigrants, who'd arrived in this country starting in 1898 to the early 1900s.

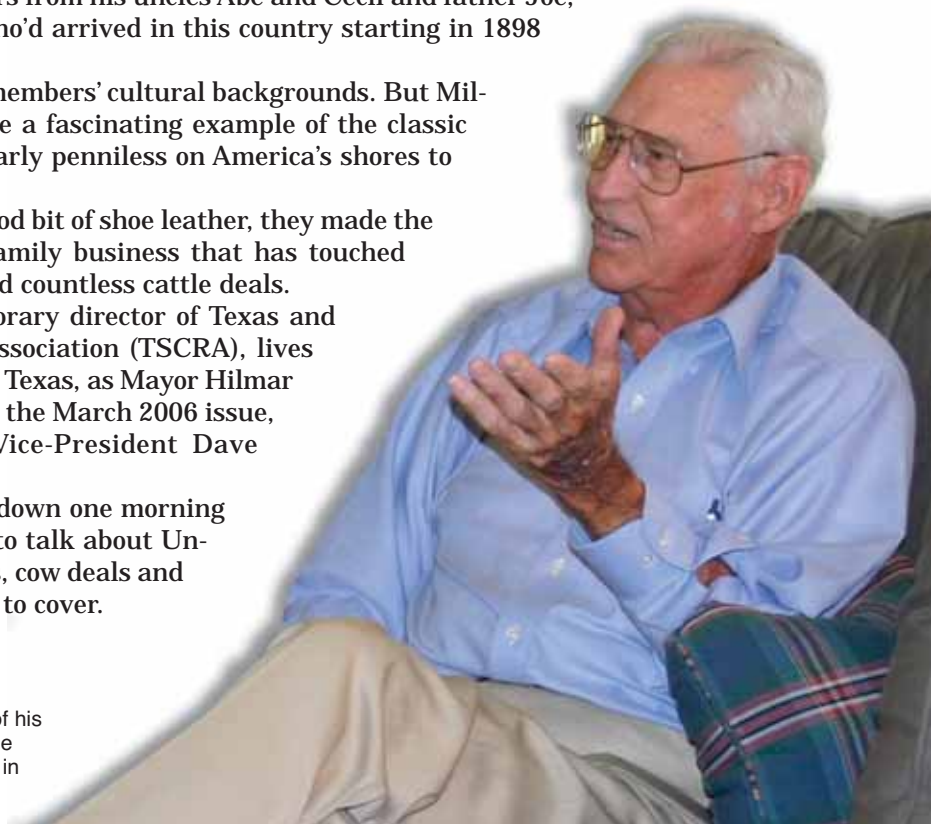
We don't often refer to our members' cultural backgrounds. But Milton and his extended family are a fascinating example of the classic American dream of arriving nearly penniless on America's shores to make a life.

By their hard work and a good bit of shoe leather, they made the dream come true, building a family business that has touched thousands of people and sparked countless cattle deals.

Milton Robinowitz, an honorary director of Texas and Southwestern Cattle Raisers Association (TSCRA), lives on the same street in Richmond, Texas, as Mayor Hilmar Moore, whom we wrote about in the March 2006 issue, and TSCRA incoming First Vice-President Dave Scott.

These three gentlemen sat down one morning with Lionel Chambers and me to talk about Uncle Abe, Papa Joe, good partners, cow deals and much more than we have space to cover.

Milton Robinowitz is the first generation of his family to be born in the United States. The Robinowitz family immigrated to America in the late 1800s from Russia.





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Milton and his wife June reared three sons, Joe, Bob and Kenny, at Richmond. Robinowitz and his friends credit the late Mrs. Robinowitz for turning out three sons who share a great deal of admiration and affection for their father and each other.



Uncle Abe arrives in America

The Robinowitz family faced starvation in Russia so they sent eldest son Abe to America. Other sons were to follow when there was enough money to buy passage.

Abe's father was a forester for the government and his mother baked to supplement the family's meager income. "The story has it," Robinowitz says, "that my grandmother, when she got through baking, would sweep all the crumbs into a paper sack and keep them because somebody would get that with a little water or a little milk and that would be a meal."

Abe was about 14 when he was sent from Minsk to a distant relative in the Beasley area. "They shipped him over here like you'd ship a package," Robinowitz describes. He arrived at Galveston able to speak five languages – English and Spanish were not

among them.

"In Russia, Jews didn't get to go to school as children," he explains. "The only education they could have gotten would have been in rabbinical school." Robinowitz surmises that Abe learned the languages spoken around Minsk out of need. "You had so many different peoples in that area." He learned Spanish and English after arriving in America.

Abe hit the Texas roads on foot, peddling goods to farmers. "He started walking up and down the country roads selling items like shoe laces and gingham out of a pack on his back — whatever he had," Robinowitz says.

In those days, farmers would often take in and feed travelers, so Abe got to know the area folks quite well. Often, before Abe set out the next day, the farmer would put in an order. "The next time around, he'd bring them whatever it was they needed,"

Robinowitz says.

When Abe had saved enough, he sent for his brother Cecil, who was also about 14 years old when he arrived in Texas. This doubled the territory the Robinowitz brothers could cover. "When Cecil got here, one of them went east and one of them went west," Robinowitz says. "When my father Joe got here, one went east, one went west and one went another way. They hit every road they could." Robinowitz estimates Joe to have been about 11 or 12 years old when he hit the roads.

"They finally accumulated enough to buy a mule and a wagon. One of them took the mule and wagon and the other two just kept walking," he laughs.

"Then they accumulated enough to get a little shop in town. One of them stayed there, one of them took the mule and wagon and one of them kept walking. Gradually, they sent for



Robinowitz says his wife June was a “dauber” who created this original art work of their three sons.



Hilmar Moore, Lionel Chambers and Dave Scott gathered in Robinowitz’s living room, amid family photos and mementos, to share stories of growing up with Uncle Abe and Papa Joe Robinowitz and of cattle deals and partnerships that have sailed through or squeaked by.

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their mother and father, three sisters and two brothers.”

By walking the country roads, Abe, Cecil and Joe “got to know the farmers. That was a pretty important thing as they progressed,” Robinowitz says. “My uncle’s idea was to put a little store everywhere there was a community. Transportation was a problem,” he explains about the early 1900s Houston area. “We had mud roads. You couldn’t go to Houston in 30 minutes, so the farmers traded at the closest store.”

Since the farmers were buying their goods at the Robinowitz’s community stores, the next logical step was for the family to help out their clients by offering them financing for seed and supplies.

The farmer would pay off the account after harvest, but in bad years, whatever the farmer had produced became the payment.

“If he produced cotton, they’d take the cotton and apply it on the debt. That put them in the cotton business,” Robinowitz explains.

That’s also how they got into the cattle business. A farmer couldn’t pay them back in cash, but did have two heifer calves worth \$12 a piece. “They took two heifer calves and they were immediately in the cattle business,” he says.

“Abe was a businessman and he didn’t do anything but work,” Robinowitz remembers. “He didn’t sleep, he didn’t eat, he just worked and he enjoyed it. I don’t know what drove him, I guess just because they were so damn poor. He saw an opportunity here they didn’t have over there and he wanted to take advantage of it.”

Ahead of his time

Hilmar Moore says his father John was Abe Robinowitz’s first gentile partner. Moore remem-

bers the day in 1928 the two men spent discussing their partnership. He admires Abe for having been a thinker ahead of his time.

The Robinowitz Moore partnership started with a trip to Louisiana to buy steers. “The man would only sell the steers if my father and Abe would buy the heifers, too. So then they went to the Pierce Ranch and bought a bull to put on the heifers,” Moore says.

The irony is that first Robinowitz Moore cattle partnership made more money off the heifers they hadn’t wanted than the steers they did want. “Dad said the steers might have broken even, but the heifers ultimately were the best deal he ever made,” Moore chuckles.

Robinowitz Brothers supplied the financing and the partner supplied the land on which the cattle grazed. When the cattle were sold, the profits were split

evenly between the partners. Each partner kept a record of expenses to be charged to the partnership.

In the original Robinowitz Moore partnership, Moore remembers, "Dad would give an account of all his expenses and Abe would give an account of all his. Then at the end of it, Abe said, 'Johnny, I want you to sign my (record book) and I'll sign yours.' My father said, 'Why you know I trust you!' Abe said that wasn't the point. He said, 'We may not be here to settle it. The farthest anyone could come back on either one of us is the last line that we signed.'

"Abe was taking care of things that today happen all the time, but in those days didn't happen very often," Moore says. "He saw that, in this way, if there was a split, neither one could go behind the last year that was signed."

The Robinowitz Moore partnership, like the majority of the Robinowitz partnerships, was a 50-50 arrangement. The brothers didn't seek controlling interest, but preferred to be equal partners in their dealings.

Building partnerships

Abe devised an interesting way to cultivate young men as partners in the family's general stores. Robinowitz admits his method might not be attractive today to young entrepreneurs, but in the early 1900s, it seemed to work.

"Abe would find a young man that he had confidence in and believed was honest," he says. For example, one partner was Mr. Otto, a bank teller in Beasley. This young man might have been earning \$200 a month. "Abe went to him and said, 'Let's go to East Bernard and open up a general store. You run it but ... we're only going to pay you \$140 a month. At the end of the year, whatever profit is made, half of it is yours and you can apply that against buying your half of the business."

"You couldn't entice a young

person to do that today," he points out. "My boys wouldn't even listen to you. But in those days, people could see opportunity and they would do it. That's the way George Bull came on," and Doyle F. McAdams Sr. TSCRA Director Jim McAdams, Doyle's grandson, remembers his parents and grandparents speaking fondly of Abe Robinowitz. He says the partnership had a positive impact on his family back in the 1920s and 1930s when the two families partnered on a general store.

The general stores were the social centers for the communities on Friday evenings. "You could hardly get in there. They sold everything in some stores. Some stores were like the fashion shop with just ready-to-wear clothing. The store in El Campo was ready-to-wear. But in East Bernard, Rosenberg, Damon and Danevang, you could walk in those stores and buy anything," Robinowitz remembers. "You could buy meat at the meat market. You could buy groceries, ladies' clothes, men's clothes and all kinds of hardware."

Robinowitz learned a few drawbacks to partnerships over his lifetime. Some arrangements existed for a limited time, he says, explaining, "It was good when it started out because the man doing the work needed the man with the money. The man with the money needed the other one. But, as soon as the partnership started making a lot of money, the man doing the work said, 'I don't need him anymore.'"

Life lessons

Abe and Joe Robinowitz's teenage years forced them to learn independence and self-reliance. Perhaps that's why they put teenaged Milton in tough situations.

"Back in those days, you could drive a car at 14 years old," Robinowitz says, so Abe started sending him to cattle auction markets to buy steers and to gain experience. "He wanted to instill

confidence," Robinowitz remembers. "It took me a while to get that confidence. He had to give me several good cussings before I did," he chuckles, shaking his head.

One cussing came after an unsuccessful trip to buy a load of steers at the Madisonville auction market when Milton was 14. He was to buy 35 to 40 steers and send them to Abe's partner, Mr. Blankfield at Pasadena.

"I went up there and was scared to death," Robinowitz remembers. Instead of one load, he managed to buy one steer. The sale barn owner knew Abe Robinowitz and knew this was not good. He offered to help young Milton by buying the steer back.

"I was in heaven I was so happy," Robinowitz says with short-lived relief. He went home to find a note from his mother. Call Uncle Abe. No matter what time.

"I picked up the phone and called him," he says, re-living the dread of a tired 14 year old. After Milton reported the day's activities, Abe told him to get in the car and drive over to his house. This was about midnight and young Milton tried to explain, to no avail, the late hour and how tired he was.

"I got in my car and went over there," Robinowitz says woefully, and enunciates each word very clearly, to the laughter of his listeners, "It took him from about 12:30 until daylight to tell me just what a dumb SOB I was."

We learn from our experiences, or at least Robinowitz did. Shortly after that, he was sent to Hallettsville to buy a load of steers from well-known order buyer Julius Caesar. "I bought two loads of steers!" just to be on the safe side.

Looking back, Robinowitz says Abe didn't care about the price of the steers, and was willing to take a loss to teach a life lesson. "All he was trying to do was instill confidence in me."

Dave Scott reminds us of the time Papa Joe Robinowitz put his son in a situation doomed to near-

failure. "You know, now-a-days, people get into a bad situation and they just panic," Robinowitz says. "They just go all to pieces. They don't know what to do. Well, to prevent that from happening, my dad wanted to put me in situations where things were bad so that I'd figure out how to get out of it and not panic. It was intentional."

Joe told his son and the ranch foreman to load six or seven steers from a bunch recently purchased out of Florida. Robinowitz is the horseman and roper in the family, so the idea of roping and tying a few head in a trailer wasn't a problem.

The problem was the transportation equipment. Robinowitz was provided a car with no trailer hitch, and a two-wheeled trailer to tie to the back of the car with a chain.

Neither the car, a Whippet, nor the trailer had a spare tire, and the car didn't have a jack. Of course, a flat tire later that day was inevitable. "We couldn't do anything but just sit there until somebody came along that had a jack," he laughs. Somebody did come along and the two young men, "jacked it up, chocked the wheel, took the tire off, got it to town, got it fixed, went back, put it on," he says matter-of-factly.

"The idea was you don't panic," Robinowitz emphasizes. "If something goes wrong, you just do the best you can. And there was no such thing as coming back to him or Abe and saying, 'I couldn't do this because of so and so.'" One of his cousins did that – once. "That cussing lasted all day long," he remembers.

Buzzing the courthouse

Robinowitz graduated from Louisiana State University with a forestry degree before he was called up to begin his Army Air Corps service in World War II.

Forestry was Uncle Abe's idea. "He decided I needed to go get a degree in forestry. He was planning to go to East Texas where the pine timber is grown

and buy land. If I knew about timber, we'd run cattle on that land under the timber and when the timber was cut off."

Robinowitz graduated in the summer of 1942 and went into the service in the fall of that year. His service included being an instructor in the BT-13. "From there, I flew a bunch of different airplanes," including the C-46, flying cargo over the hump, or the Himalayas, from Burma into China.

The Air Corps encouraged the young pilots to accumulate stick time during their off hours and let them take the equipment out for weekend trips. He was stationed in Arkansas City, Kan.

A family friend ran into Robinowitz and a fellow pilot who accompanied him to Richmond one weekend. The family friend, a gambler Robinowitz points out, demanded the young pilots give Richmond a good buzzing on their way back to San Antonio, or else he'd make sure they never came back again! "So we put on a show for the city of Richmond because I wanted to come back," Robinowitz remembers.

Moore and Scott pick up the story, because Robinowitz is laughing too hard. Apparently, workers in second-floor offices in the courthouse were able to look out their windows across into the cockpit of the plane. They flew low enough that they had to look up to read "Richmond" on the water tower. They were done in by dinnerware. The china of a leading citizen's wife rattled off the shelf and broke. Her husband called their commanding officer to file a complaint.

Robinowitz says he and his friend, Sam Lance from Hutchinson, Kan., were divided after that incident. "He was a pure nut. The commander had to split us up. He became a B-24 pilot and I went another route."

Robinowitz had hoped to buy a ranch of his own when he got out of the service, but events altered his plan. "Uncle Abe passed away in November of 1945 and I got home

in April of 1946." His father needed help running the businesses and partnerships, so he went to work for the family. He's been in the cattle, cotton, rice, pecan businesses ever since.

About this time, Mayor Moore and his late wife Kelly were enjoying a happy home life with their growing family. One day, Robinowitz was commiserating to Moore about his single state. "When Milton got home from the service," Moore recalls, "he worked during the day, but he ran all night. I said 'Milton, the places you go off at night, you aren't going to find anybody to marry. You better clean your act up.' About six weeks later he brought June out."

Milton was introduced to June by a distant cousin. "The first date I had with her we went with a group to see something in Houston, I think in February. We got married in September."

June passed away in 1997, leaving three sons who were raised to enjoy each other's company and to respect and admire their father. Scott says, "I had a man ask me what I thought Milton has done to make his boys think so much of him and care so much for him and be like they are. God knows I don't know. I thought a minute, then said, 'Well, No. 1, he married June.'" Moore chimes in, "That's right."

Robinowitz says, "I'm very fortunate to get along real good with my boys." After a pause, he adds, "The only word you can use about them is they are kind of nuts! Put the three of them together they like to have fun and they are fun to be around."

Joe, at the time of this visit, was the managing editor of the *New York Post* and has since taken a different position within News Corp. Kenny lives in Dallas and is in banking with Wells Fargo and Bob works with Telecommunications, Inc., a subsidiary of the Rockefeller Group, in New York.

Cattle deals

Within TSCRA, Milton Robi-

nowitz is known for partnering on cattle.

After he got home from the war, most of the Robinowitz partnerships operated by accumulating cattle to send to grazing on bluestem pastures in Kansas and northern Oklahoma.

"In April, we'd ship them to pasture and sell them in the fall. You wouldn't want to ship anything younger than two years old," he explains. By the end of October, the cattle would be shipped on to St. Joseph, Mo., Wichita or Kansas City.

He continued shipping cattle to Kansas pastures until the end of the 1950s and start of the 1960s. Hilmar Moore had an interest in a ranch in Colorado, so they sent partnered cattle up there to pasture in the summers. From there, he started sending cattle to New Mexico for grazing.

Robinowitz has fond memories of partner Bill Franka, a man who always saw the humorous side of every situation.

One story involves driving about 1,000 steers along the highway from Angleton to East Columbia. After about a week's work, Robinowitz, Franka and their crew had gathered the cattle out of the brush. "We had the train ordered at East Columbia and here we go out on the highway. It was one of these highways that had pretty big ditches on each side and woods on both sides," he remembers.

"Everything was going pretty on the way to the railroad," when trouble drove down the highway in the form of oilfield roughnecks. "They got right up in the middle of those cattle and they got to blowing their horn and banging on the car. The cattle just boiled over those fences after we'd been down there a week! I mean they were just going everywhere."

Disgusted, Robinowitz rode up to Franka, who had been at the head of the herd, asking why he hadn't done something about the troublemakers. Franka said he did. "When them fellas got about five miles down the road, I

give them the damndest cussing you ever heard!"

Not every deal was destined to make money. Robinowitz remembers, "We got into a bad year in 1953. It was catastrophic." Robinowitz and Franka had partnered on some Florida steers that just couldn't gain weight in Kansas. What made it worse was they'd penciled out their losses. This proved to both men that if they'd bought and paid for the steers and had left them standing in Florida, they would have lost less money. But, they'd taken delivery and had to get the steers sold.

Buyers for the 600 head were nowhere to be found until Elmer Rabin from California showed up. "He gave us a draft on a packer in California," Robinowitz says and the steers were sold.

A day of gathering, sorting and loading the cattle led to an agonizing night of back pain for Robinowitz. "We were in Pawhuska at the hotel," he remembers. "If I laid on the floor it helped my back. So I took my pillow and laid it down between the beds. I was moaning and groaning and Bill looked over at me and asked what was the matter. I said my back was killing me. He said, 'Oh, I can fix that. How do you know that draft's good?'"

Immediately Robinowitz's worry shifted from his backache to his bank account. Several calls later, they finally reached the packer at midnight, California time. After explaining the situation to the packer, Robinowitz asked, "We're wondering is this draft any good? He, in kind of broken English, said, 'Vell, if the cattle is vhat they say they is, the draft vill be good.'

"Bill looked at me and said, 'I hope the cattle is vhat they say they is.'"

The Robinowitz Franka partnership endured drought with humor, also. The partners gathered all the cattle they had left, somewhere around 1,300, and fed them daily, losing money. Frankie Pope from Louisiana offered to

buy the cattle.

Pope arrived in his Cadillac and turned the wheel over to Robinowitz to drive while looking at the cattle. Franka hopped in the back and hunched forward between the two front seats to join the conversation.

After looking at their cattle, Pope wanted the partners to come on with him to look at other cattle nearby. On the way, the paved road turned to a gravel road, telephone poles lining the side.

Pope asked what the partners wanted for the cattle. Franka outlined his selling price, which included pulling out the culls and figuring in a three percent shrink. The bottom line was 12 1/2 cents per pound.

Pope's reply was, "I'll tell you what I'm going to do. I'm going to give 11 1/2 cents a pound and I'm going to take every one you deliver to the scales. And you see that second telephone pole up there? My bid's off when we get to that second pole."

Robinowitz remembers his partner's reply, "Bill tapped him on the shoulder and said, 'I'll tell you what we're going to do. We're going to give you one of them poles back.'"

Robinowitz and Mayor Moore partnered on cattle for more than 20 years. In 1980, he sold out to Moore, and "there was a period of three weeks there that I didn't owe a dime and I didn't own one animal and I was going crazy. Dave (Scott) called and said he had some feeder cattle, would I be interested? I went and looked at them. He said, 'You ought to buy these cattle. They're worth the money.' I said well if you think they are so much worth the money, would you partner? He said yes and we've been partners ever since."

Scott nods, saying Robinowitz keeps the books and "has the money when you need it."

When I asked them to tell about the one deal they knew was going to be a wreck, but turned out all right, they erupt. "It happened this year!" Robinowitz says, with Scott laughing at the

same time, "We just wound it up last Friday."

Scott says, "I think the biggest tough spot Milton and I were in was when we lost multiple pastures within a 30-day period and had to try to find a place to go with cattle, right in the middle of winter. It could have been really bad," but they did find scattered pastures.

In another deal, Robinowitz Scott cattle had been placed on a leased wheat pasture that had been found for them by the feedlot owner who was going to buy those cattle.

They expected to graze the wheat until May. Two bad things happened. The wheat didn't produce enough grazing, so the partners had to pay for feed "anticipating that we'd catch up in the spring," Scott says. "Then the man called and said the farmer wants to harvest this wheat. It was just about getting to where they'd have a little wheat to graze. He said we'd have to move the cattle."

Robinowitz continues the story, "Man, we hadn't even thought about moving them! Dave got busy on one end, I got busy, we called some friends and ended up getting the cattle taken care of, some in the feedlot, some in the pasture." It turns out the farmer and the feedlot owner were the same person.

Robinowitz tells of one of their favorite grass leases at Cedarvale, Kan. "We loved that place. It had a big lake in the middle with bluestem all the way around it. It was great!" but they had to get over some concerns about the lessor. They called him Farmer Brown thanks to his overalls and brogans.

"Dave was riding with the man and asked where were the cattle pens? The man said, 'We're in the pen.'" According to Scott, those pens consisted of scant barbed wire, antique net wire and an old crate here and there. They just knew half the cattle turned into that beautiful bluestem pasture would never be found again.

Farmer Brown surprised them, though, bringing all but one of the steers to the market on sale day. He was so honest that he took Robinowitz and Scott to see the carcass of the one steer that died. "We wanted to go back so bad the next year," Robinowitz says. Sadly, Farmer Brown declined their offer.

Partners are everything

"You can tell that nearly all of my experience has been with a partner," Robinowitz says. "When my father died I inherited more partners than most people dream about. I wouldn't know how many, counting all the ones in the stores and all my relatives.

"But I've been very, very fortunate," he says, speaking highly of the three cattle partners he's hand-picked over the years – Moore, Scott and Mr. John Browder at New Waverly.

"I'll underwrite there are no people like them anywhere on earth. They are knowledgeable and honest. I haven't got that much, but any one of them could have whatever I've got because I know if I was supposed to get something back, I'd get it back."

Honesty, integrity come first in Milton Robinowitz's partnerships. Those traits have served him well in a life full of more stories than we can tell and good times with his family and friends. His partners sitting with us that morning agree. ■