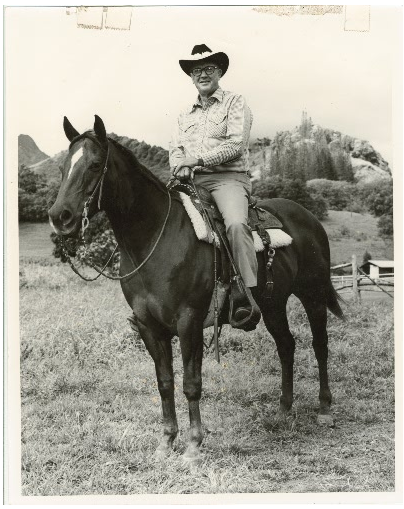
James M. Greenwell



Born in Kona, James M. Greenwell is the grandson of Henry N. Greenwell who arrived in Hawaii in 1850. After adventurous years growing up on the family ranch at Hualalai, which included such fun as lassoing wild turkeys out of trees at night, James was hand-picked by the legendary A.W. Carter to to run Kohala Ranch a section of Parker Ranch at Puuhue. He was just 18 years old. At the ripe age of 24, he was named manager of Hawaii Meat Company, the production and marketing operation of Parker Ranch, which was located on O`ahu. This was Hawaii's largest meat marketing outlet, serving the needs of local producers and was a stabilizing influence in the market. Following the difficult war years, James became one of the industry's guiding forces in the transition from a grass-finished beef industry to a cow –calf industry geared to the demands of a market for grain-fed beef. Under his leadership, Hawaii Meat Company opened Hawaii's first commercial scale, modern feedlot at West Loch. This was then expanded and moved to Campbell Industrial Park. After retiring from Parker Ranch/Hawaii Meat Company, James became president of his family's Palani Ranch in Kona. He developed and successfully marketed the exceptional beef known as "Kona Brand Yearling Beef". Mr. Greenwell, now 86 and retired in Kona after a distinguished career as an innovative and visionary leader in Hawaii's cattle industry, still has an adventurous story or two to tell. Ask him about the time he roped a loose cow on the road from his car.

Paniolo Hall of Fame

Oral History Interview

James M. Greenwell

June 1, 2002; Honokohau, Hawaii

By: Anna Ilima Loomis (I)

James Greenwell was born Aug. 17, 1915, in the family home in Honokohau, Hawaii.

I don't know who attended to my mother when I was born, but I was born in the house. I was the third. I had two sisters that followed. Five children: two brothers, two sisters, and me.

It was a big house. It had a basement where we kept all the saddles and where the laundry was done. Then the main floor had four bedrooms and then an attic that was only used for storage. It

was a big attic, but it was a big house, and still is. It's pretty much the same kind of house only

decorated very differently today.

We didn't have water supplies like we have today. Every house had a tank or two, and water was caught off the roof.

Bobby Hind and I both got typhoid at the same time. I guess I was about five years old. Dr. Dickson would come from South Kona where his home was and he'd stop at the family's and give me a going over and then he'd go on to Puuwaawaa to see Bobby. Well, by the time Bobby recovered, the road, the gravel portion through the lava country, the corners were well-banked because Dr. Dickson would go around at a fast pace and the gravel would fly.

Part of the ranch operation of this section involved supplying beef to Holualoa, Kailua and through there, and the butcher cattle were brought from Kaumalumalu, mauka, at probably thirty-five-hundred, four thousand foot elevation, down to the highway and then brought here.

Friday was slaughter day, and two cowboys would come pick two animals, drive them down to the road, and the slaughterhouse was about where the Palani Ranch barn is today. Late Friday night, Mr. William Kina'aina -- who was a good cowboy, also the head butcher -- would go and cut the meat and wrap the orders that had been taken by telephone. Then a little after daylight he'd load up his bus, which also served as a school bus during the week. He relied on cold air. There was no such thing as refrigeration (laughs). The meat was only a few hours old, you see? He would peddle his meat on Saturdays, ending up at Amfac in Kailua, from which he would bring back supplies for the ranch and the house.

I: Can you give me an idea of the size of your family's operation at that time?

The family lands were mainly grazing lands above Mamalahoa. The old original round-the

island road, in the days of wagons and horses and so on, was right out here. At some point in time, my dad gave the county the Mamalahoa that goes by here now.

As far as the pasture lands are concerned, there was a big acreage from here up to the forty-eight-hundred foot elevation, and a lot of that was very rough forest country. Not too much grass but lots of fern and ohia trees and iaia. It was hard going and you couldn't run very many cattle there. And that connected with the Kaumalumalu section -- Kaumalumalu, Kahaluu, Keauhou. We had all of that. And that connected with some government leases across the top.

The ranch that my grandfather put together involved three separate ranch properties. One was the home ranch, Kalukalu, where the museum is today. Above the road it went up to five thousand foot elevation. And then there was the Kealakekua section which abutted the middle section, and the home ranch, which was the biggest section. The middle section was managed by Henry Greenwell, who was the oldest son. And the Kealakekua section by Arthur Greenwell and the Honokohau section, which was separated pretty much from the rest of it, by my dad.

I: What kind of a man was your father?

Great guy (chuckles). Good cowboy. He was a politician, kind and thoughtful to people. He taught us how to ride, how to handle a horse, how to drive cattle. Roping was slow. Nowadays kids come along very fast, but we did not do much outside roping; it was in the pen.

On all three ranches, the calves were tamed. All the cows and calves were collected, brought in to some ranch station, up on the mountain usually, and every morning the cows were led in to the calves so that the calves could feed. They were separated again for the day and then the calves got handled in a small pen. Ropes were put on, some of them were tied up for 24 hours to posts with chains that they could go around. The purpose of that was to tame the cattle, because the country was so big and so rough. If you gave them that kind of training, and they later go out, they wouldn't run away when they saw you.

In open country like Waimea we didn't have to do that. This was in rough, forested country and I don't think Mcandless' did it, I don't think Huehue did it; I don't know about Puuwaawaa, I doubt that.

The family mountain house was Pulehua, of which you may have heard. And that, I guess, is at an elevation of, oh, forty seven, forty eight hundred feet. There was this huge country that surrounded the houses up there, and the cattle were loose in it.

Butter was a big product in the early days -- and I'm referring to days before my time. There are stations on our ranch and the other ranches where Portuguese families settled. They had an arrangement with my grandfather. The purpose, as far as the ranch was concerned, was that the calves be tamed. So Greenwell ranchers supplied the cows, and the Portuguese families would get the cows and the calves together, separate them every morning, and let them come together every morning, after the cows were milked. And they would make butter. That butter was put into kegs and shipped to Honolulu, and I have heard that some of it was even sent to San Francisco.

When we got the mauka house built, that was our summer home. Before it was built and before Kealakekua had their mountain house, the Pulehua house that I referred to earlier was the family mountain house and we'd take turns in the summer. The whole family would move and maybe one or two cowboys and the maids. Everybody rode up, and the

food and all was packed up, and we set in at the Pulehua house, collecting cows and calves, taming the calves, letting the mothers come to the calves every morning to feed the calves then separating them again. Those calves would be chained to posts that they could go round and the chain was probably three, four feet long. And the calf stayed on that chain all day. You played with him. And he ended up as a nice tame animal.

I: What are the things that you did for fun when you were a boy on the ranch?

(Laughs) For one thing, my Dad always had dogs that he used for cattle. And this country that is a nice open country today was forested with heavy guava, big trees. And there were lots of wild cats. And the family had quite a few cats also. And there was a huge attic, open attic. And the cats used to love to live up there and us kids, we would chase them down and the dogs would be waiting.

My dad would be working at his desk and the cats would fly by him on their way out and the dogs would all be there and they'd have a run of about 100 yards and the cats usually made the trees (laughter). But we also had a lot of wild cats in this country and would take the same dogs come up here and we'd have a cat hunt, maybe four, five dogs. And they would -- you'd hear them baying as they followed the track, and then you'd hear them barking -- that meant they had the cat treed -- so we would go there and give the tree a shake and the dogs usually finished the cat off. It was sport.

And the Huehue Ranch sheep at the highest elevation pasture were up here across our top. Well, they suspected that our dogs were disposing of some sheep and they complained. So my dad had kennels built and they'd get chained up all the time until the day came when there was sheep wool being excreted. So the Huehue people were right, the dogs were responsible.

I: You mentioned before that the cowboys lived in houses on the ranch. How many cowboys were there?

I guess with us it was about five, and then the yard men were separate.

I: Besides giving them a house, what other things did the ranch provide for the cowboys?

Milk. I don't know if they had any assistance on beef, but the practice here was to have about, depending how good they were as milkers, maybe six to eight cows that produced all the milk. There were small patches in this vicinity where the cows ate grass during the day. And the next morning they were brought up the road -- two milkers -- and the calves were tied to the cow's front leg. The calf would go to suckle and you'd put the rope around this top joint in the cow's front leg, put your arm around the calf, he was busy trying to get his milk, pull him back to there and tie it. So the cow would stand with calf tied to one front leg, high up. You milked the cow -- I mean, you had your half, the calf got the second half. Then you took the rope off. You wanted milk for the house, we wanted to tame the calf.

In 1927, James Greenwell's family sent him and his brothers to California for schooling. He was 13 years old.

I think the family was not satisfied that we were being properly educated here. There were three boys -- one was at school in Honolulu at a military academy and then the other two were in Kona.

The family figured their sons could stand a little polishing, living with somebody other than a cowboy (laughs). And so three of us were taken to the mainland and put in a school in San Raphael. After we got used to it, going to the mainland and coming home was fun on Matson ships – there were a bunch of school kids.

On one of our trips home -- it was on the President Jackson, another Matson ship -- Mr. and Mrs. A.W. Carter were on board. We had deck chairs and it so happened I was next to Mr. and Mrs. Carter, and I used to spend a lot of time talking to him. My brothers would be downstairs in the cabin and when I'd go down there they'd raise hell -- 'who the hell do you think you are, talking to Mr. Carter?' I said, 'well, I'm enjoying it and I think he is too.'

Well, it came time for my last year, and I knew almost nobody my age in Honolulu or in Hawaii, except for around here. So I prevailed on the family to send me to Punahou for my last year.

So when I went to Punahou I hadn't seen Carter since the steamer trip. But toward the very end of the school year he invited my brother and myself -- one was at Roosevelt one at Punahou, to come to lunch on a Saturday, at the Young Hotel dining room. We went down and met him there and had a wonderful steak lunch, and we chatted and I realized afterwards he was trying to size us both up.

I graduated in June. We went up the mountain as usual for summer -- in August we were shipping a lot of cattle out through Kailua -- and there was a letter in the mail there to me from Mr. Carter offering me a job. And I couldn't have been happier.

So we discussed it; my number-two brother and my dad were there. My older brother was full-time working for this ranch, and he was also interested in his future wife, so he had no pressure to move, you see? So before we went back up the mountain, my dad called Mr. Carter and said I would be there on Monday. This was on the Friday. Come Sunday, my dad and my brother, number-two brother, and I came down there with all of my gear, and they took me to Waimea to Mr. Carter's house, and that was my entry.

I: What position did you start out in at Parker Ranch?

On the regular cowboy gang of eighteen. I made the nineteenth.

I: Did you feel from the beginning that you were being groomed to have some kind of leadership position?

I thought so. It was what I was asked to do. Regular cowboy gang every day, except on shipping days. And shipping day, when they took the cattle to Kawaehae and loaded them on the ship, I went once, for the experience. But usually on those days I would go with the rough-rider gang to Kohala Ranch, which had just been purchased, and work with them and the cowboys from Kohala Ranch. There were times where I would be asked to come to Honolulu to work in his office on tax problems or some other thing like that. He had a very good secretary, Lucille, who had been with him for a long time. I would stay at his house.

By the end of the year they had hired my middle brother, when they had had to choose from three of them – Jack Greenwell, Robert Greenwell and Radcliffe Greenwell – for a few days' test, you see. Both Jack and Robert were not interested. Robert had a girlfriend in sight and Jack was really taking over management of the Henry Greenwell Ranch. But my brother Rally accepted and he started work right after New Year's. Like me, he lived with the Carters. About then I was shifted to management of Kohala Ranch, which had only been acquired a little while before.

I: How old were you at that time, do you know?

I'll guess eighteen. I got myself a cottage the ranch had built there, and I would spend usually Monday, Tuesday, Thursday, Friday night -- maybe not Friday night because of the weekend coming -- up there. I had a cook, ranch supplied, milk cow, and that was a different part of it. If the guy that I had left, well it was up to me to find another one. But that worked very nicely. Wednesday night it was habit to come back to Carter's. I had my room there from before, you see? Very often Mr. Carter was there on Wednesday night and I would have a chance to talk to him.

I: What would you talk about?

Grass, clover, cows, horses, shipping, the kind of equipment we were using, what we would do with certain areas, or should do.

There were stations, like Keaumoku, Waikii, Makahalau, Pauhau, Humuula, and then we had Kahuku Ranch. There were times during that period where I would go with probably three or four regular cowboys to Kahuku to get to know that ranch and help with the work there. We usually went when it was branding, weaning or shipping time. That was fun over there.

Kahuku was fun because it was driving to brand, or wean or ship. That's rough forest country, and there was a certain amount of roping wild cattle. And the shipping point used by Kahuku, and Hutchinson, was Kaalualu. Kaalualu is a little bay round South Point toward Honoapu. Hutchinson built a shipping chute there, the first one.

It started on land, went over the water, and at the end there was a station on top where a guy would sit. He held one end of a long rope that went to the whale boat, which was about maybe twenty feet or more out there. And that rope that they were holding both ends of had a loop in it.

Now every animal that went down that chute had a halter, and you put it on in the chute and that was kind of dangerous. But before it went down the chute into the ocean where it was deep, the halter rope had to be tied to this loop. You see, it was on this connected line. The animal would dive down, and then the guys on the whale boat would pull it over, and the guy on top of the chute would slack. They would get the animal secured in the boat like they secured it everywhere else, with the head back, and detatch the rope. And the guy on top would pull it back, ready for the next one.

Well that was quite successful, and a copy of it was later made at Kaawaloa, over where the monument is. And Henry Greenwell and Arthur Greenwell and those people, instead of shipping out of a corral on the beach at Napoopoo -- with the horses, you know, leading the cattle in -- they converted to the chute type of shipping. And the water is so deep there the Humuula could rest between the cliff and the chute.

A.W. Carter appointed James Greenwell manager of Hawaii Meat Company in 1939. He held the position for 25 years.

Hawaii Meat was owned by a conglomerate, I guess you would say, of ranches that were stockholders, because it handled cattle from, oh, Niihau, Molokai, Maui, Hawaii, all over, you see?

I: Were you pleased to be sent to Honolulu for that job?

Yes, somewhat, because about the time I was moved down the meat company had leased 20,000 acres of Campbell Estate, grazing lands, part of Kahuku and part of Ewa. So I still had my ranching.

I: How much of your job at Hawaii Meat involved working on the land?

Working on the ranch? Oh, not a great deal because I had good people, a good foreman, I would say my time -- maybe fifteen percent. The planning and all is all separate from the actual work.

I: What did the facility consist of at the time? What did you have to work with?

The slaughterhouse and several chill rooms where beef was hung after it was killed. Once in a while we killed sheep. Everything was saved on the cattle end. We made tallow and dried blood for fertilizer that we sold. We saved all the hides and they were shipped sometimes to California, sometimes to Japan. And that's a smelly job to get involved in, to pull the hides and shake them out and then roll them up, and tie them. But we had good men there too. So that was five days a week, sometimes as much as 125 animals in a day.

I: How did you manage transport, how did that work?

Small lots by truck, Oahu Transport had big trucks. We used to have them do the hauling. When the boat load was there, they would take the cattle out by train and the train unloaded right where their pasture was. Cattle for slaughter were moved by train; it was just a short run from wherever the pier was out to Kalihi.

I: Not long after you started, the war years came. How did that affect business for you?

They used to have these food ships that had a lot of refrigerated space. Freighters, you know? And they would come in with a convoy and that was a round-the-clock job, getting them unloaded and all of these chilled and frozen items put away wherever the warehouse was in Honolulu. There were several and they were all up to the brim most of the time. And that was hard work, because any chill space was usable, I don't care how high you've got the merchandise in there and stuffed away. It was hard work. That was all in addition to whatever cattle we could get to slaughter. Now, some places the number of cattle we were getting fell off because of supplying the Army with meat on that particular island

Butcher shops and markets around town, I think, always had meat to sell. But they went through a period there where it was nip and tuck as to whether they got enough. The Navy was a good customer. But the navy would send their inspector to go through our chill rooms and pick the sides that they wanted. Army did the same thing.

I: After living on a ranch for so long, did you enjoy living in Honolulu at that time?

It was fun, I had -- was beginning to meet some society. In fact, I met my wife.

I: Then maybe I can go back, was it hard for you when you were living on the ranch: the isolation, the lack of society.

No. I loved the work, and Honolulu was a lot more office work than outside.

Hawaii Meat opened Hawaii's first commercial-scale feedlot in 1958.

I: I know one of the changes that the industry went through at that time was moving from grass-fed beef to grain-fed beef. Can you tell me about how that worked?

It didn't make sense for us not to go to a feedyard, so that the ranchers could take their cattle off the grass much earlier, when they were light and young. And then we would feed them concentrate feed and we would have a quality of meat that came from an animal that didn't run all over the range but was fed, cared for in a small area.

I hired a young man who was a graduate of some smaller college in California but had had a lot of feeding experience. And he connected me to a feed operator in Southern California and one of the head guys there became a very close friend of mine and then we used him as a consultant.

To convince the ranchers that marketing this way was to their advantage took a little doing. But we did. And that was going along fine. To get it started I had searched the other end of Oahu for an appropriate feed yard and feeding site, and I was able to acquire from the Campbell Estate 180 acres in one spot, in a very conveniently situated spot.

It was coral land, all flat, and it was underlaid with fresh water. We needed part of it for the plant, the feed mill and storage, and then the cattle yards, and there was all this area left. And knowing the water that we had, there was a lot of extra to cover, oh, I guess, 120 acres or so. So we broke that coral up and we put in pipelines, and then we got ourselves those big overhead sprinklers. And we were taking the cleanings from the floors of the pens, you know what I mean, and spreading it over the crushed coral. We were growing alfalfa which we mowed and baled just like you would on the mainland. Molokai was doing it on some of their land. And the alfafa alone did not give us enough tonnage so we found a grass to grow with the alfalfa to bring the tonnage up. But we made a beautiful hay, baled and all, and that was used in feeding the cattle.

I: In many ways it sounds like this whole switch was a bit of a risk, because you had to increase the facility size, you had to increase the amount of money you were spending on the cattle itself. What made you feel that the investment would be worth it in the end?

Because the rancher, instead of holding his best pastures for finishing out his market cattle, could get rid of the market cattle at a younger age and use all of that nice pasture to grow more cattle, increase his production. The meat company

did not run just to make profit. It ran to serve the ranchers in every way possible and do it in a manner where it did not **lose** money.

I: Why do you think it took so much longer for feeding to come out to Hawaii?

I think habitually the ranchers were accustomed to finishing on grass. They had prepared certain pastures to fatten cattle best. It was not a one-corporation idea, it had to be sold to the other ranchers. But Parker Ranch being the biggest was the leader, they said go ahead.

I: Why do you think that Hawaii tends to be more traditional in its ways?

Well, our grass-growing seasons are quite different and more prevalant than the mainland. I don't think our cattlemen here, until recently, were travelers -- to learn about how it was being done over there. Today everybody seems to be involved in a little way or a big way. But in the old days, if you had a meeting of ranch men, no matter what the meeting was for, if they had time to just be sort of loose and running around, nine times out of ten those guys would group and what would they talk about? It was pasture improvement. What grasses, what clovers for where. And what are the weeds and what do you use to control the weeds, and that kind of thing.

After we got into this thing, into feed yards, a lot of that diminished and today, you get the same group of guys together and what do they talk about? Where are you sending your cattle? What are you getting? Are you going to Nebraska or Kansas or Texas? All of that added cost, you see? And I don't know that they are making as much money. I haven't spent any time on it, I got so disgusted with the thing, the whole thing, I just turned my back on it. And I have very strong feelings about who was to blame for it all.

As long as Mr. A.W. Carter was alive, everything was going fine. When he dies, Hartwell Carter rises to the position -- he'd been there right along. And somewhere along there, Richard Smart decides to come home to Waimea. He is not a cattleman. He is not a horseman. He is a show man. And there was something that happened in the hiring of a manager for Parker Ranch. The choice that was favored was Richard Penhallow.

What Penhallow was trying to do was move the slaughterhouse, the feedyard and all of those facilities and business to Kawaehae. Parker Ranch was the favorite. And I wouldn't buy that, because we served all the other ranches. This was setting it up so that Parker Ranch was favoring Parker Ranch. And that’s wrong.

And so they wanted to move the thing to Kawaihae, which was totally asinine because even if they found the cattle and slaughtered the cattle and packed the meat, it had to be carted to Honolulu. And that would be in refrigerated space, you see? It's not like sending the live animal and having it slaughtered and refrigerated there before it was distributed.

I: What direction did the industry start taking at that point?

Well, they were caught in a situation where they had separated from fattening cattle on grass, gone to feeding. So it was a question of where do we go. And so, most of them -- some fast and some slow -- moved to sending these young cattle to the mainland.

I think it has gotten into a situation where they are not happy with shipping cattle to the mainland like they do. I think if you resurrected it and got the support of everybody to do excactly what we were doing, you would find that the ranchers would probably double their production and go ahead from there.

James Greenwell retired from Hawaii Meat, he says, at least partly because of the proposal to move Hawaii Meat to Kawaihae. Eventually, the slaughterhouse was closed.

There was a stockholders' meeting and I cover that in here (points to his book). I had been trying to persuade Parker Ranch and not working at it as hard as I might because I had no fall-back. I was a Parker Ranch guy, you see? I can remember the meeting being held in the Young Building and after the meeting, several of my respected ranch men compadres walked up the street and had lunch at the Young Hotel. And I remember Herbert Shipman saying -- I think he had a drink -- “here's to the wake. The deed is done.”