

The Life of Max G. Michaelis, Jr.

Max Gustav Michaelis, Jr. was born in 1905 on the Michaelis Ranch outside of the Central Texas town of Kyle. He was the son of M. G. Michaelis, Sr. and his wife Lillie Anna Louise Huettig Michaelis. Over the next seventy years, Max would become one of the most influential ranchers in North America.

M. G. Michaelis, Sr. came from Round Top, Texas. He went to Germany to study architecture but returned to the U.S. after he decided he would rather be a rancher. Before settling down in Kyle, he ranched in New Braunfels, Mexico, and on the King Ranch in South Texas. He started buying land in the Hays County area, where Kyle was located, in 1894 and continued to do so until the mid 1920s. Although his first love was cattle breeding, the money in those days came from breeding Jacks and Jennets, the mules that were used by everyone from farmers to the U.S. Army. M. G. had a reputation for breeding mammoth jacks, and one Jack, "Blue Wonder," was the largest of his age in the world. He also bred saddle horses, Arabians, Polled Herefords and Shorthorn cattle, but the motto he printed on his business card was "I have more Jennets in my herd than all breeders in Texas combined."

The Michaelis family was very proud of its German heritage, and Max grew up speaking

German as well as English. Visitors and customers from Mexico were common at the ranch, as M. G. had made many contacts when he had ranched there. M. G. was an exceptionally skilled breeder, and he passed much of his knowledge on to his son Max.

By the time Max graduated from Kyle High School, he was already on the Texas A&M cattle judging team. When the team went to Kansas City for the national contest, it won third place and Max received the highest score at the contest. There was a drought in Hays County in the summer of 1925, so M. G. leased the Las Rusias ranch outside of Músquiz, Coahuila and sent Max with a herd of registered Shorthorns to manage the place until the drought was over. He entrusted supervision of Max to a friend he had made during his ranching days in Mexico, a brilliant man named David McKeller.

McKeller was the son of a Scottish immigrant to Mexico who was ranching with the Mariposa Cattle Company, which was incorporated in Arizona and had stockholders in Scotland, New Zealand, and Mexico. He wore a coat and tie while working on the ranch. He was very thrifty kept meticulous records. Max would later recall an instance when he had gone into town on a shopping trip and come back one penny short. McKeller forced him to stay up until midnight trying to balance the books before he finally remembered giving the penny to a boy who had opened a gate for him. Over time, McKeller and Max became great friends. The old Scotsman was adamant that Max be a gentleman as well as a rancher.

Max got his start in Mexico by trading the herd of registered Shorthorns he had brought with him for commercial cattle at a ratio of three for one. He had always liked the idea of ranching big, and this deal tripled the size of his herd. Running cattle with David McKeller and working for him at the same time taught Max so much that when the time came for him to attend Texas A&M

University, he refused. Telling his father he had found the land, the people, and the job he loved, he claimed that he could learn more from McKeller than he could from any of the professors at Texas A&M because McKeller was a master of the business end of ranching as well as the scientific end. M. G. reluctantly agreed to let him stay.

Over the next few years, McKeller taught Max everything he could. But in 1929, when Max felt he had learned everything there was to learn, he formed a partnership with George and Phil Walker of Luling, Texas and their friend Miller Ainsworth, and together they bought two giant ranches in the mountains of northwestern Coahuila, the El Fortín Ranch and the Carrizalejo. Once again, M. G. provided the capital for his son's venture.

By this point, the advent of the automobile was causing the Jack business to peter out. However, it seems that M. G. was able to get the money that financed his son's ventures from another source. The 1931 publication *Who's Who In Texas* lists M. G.'s younger brother, Charles Jasper Michaelis, a druggist and laundry owner in Galveston, as an influential man in Texas. In 1926, M. G. paid off a \$32,146 debt to Charles by giving him the 2700 acre Gatlin Creek Ranch in Hays County. When Charles died two years later, the ranch passed to his wife, Kate Cortes Michaelis, who ran sheep and goats there until her death in the late 1950s. The loss of the Gatlin Creek Ranch left M. G. with the Michaelis Ranch and the Lone Man Pasture, only 2100 acres. To replace the Jack business, M. G. began phasing Herefords into his cattle breeding program and phasing out the old Shorthorns. His last big sale of Jacks was to the South African government in 1936. The man who traveled all the way to Texas to buy them on behalf of the South African government was Dr. Schreuder, the brother-in-law of Dr. Albert Schweitzer.

Max's partnership with the Walker brothers and Miller Ainsworth was a good one, and it

lasted until 1932, when he married Helen Mary Hall. He had first met her on the Kuykendall Ranch outside Austin, where Buck Steiner, the late owner of Capitol Saddlery, would always claim that he introduced them. Helen's father was a rancher in Eden, Texas. Her friend Bob Dernhardt later recalled her arrival in Austin, "When Helen decided to attend the University of Austin, she did not want to part with her horses. She drove them overland from the ranch at Eden to Austin. The sight of a pretty co-ed driving a band of horses up Lamar and across 19th was not everyday fare even for the citizens of Austin, Texas. She attended the university for two years when she was offered the chance to teach riding. This she did at the Westenfield Stables which she had purchased for a riding club and to house her horses. This was in 1928 and Texas may well have been the first state college to offer credit in the Physical Education Department for horseback riding."

When Max married Helen, the partners decided it was time to dissolve the partnership. The Walkers let Max and Helen pick which ranch they wanted, and the newlyweds chose El Fortín. The newlyweds left Las Rusias and moved to El Fortín, where they lived in a tent until their house was completed.

In 1930, a Mexican of French descent, Jean Pugibet, arranged for a shipment of purebred Charolais cattle from France to his ranch in Mexico. He had seen them in France while serving there as a soldier in World War I, and was eager to try them out in the New World. Although Pugibet would arrange for two more shipments in 1931 and 1937, the original Charolais of 1930 were acquired by General Perez TreviZo, the Minister of Agriculture and Livestock for the Republic of Mexico. These Charolais would become known as the TreviZo Herd. In 1934,

General TreviZo gave two bulls from this herd to his friend General Miguel Acosta. General Acosta was a good friend of Max and gave the bulls to him. At this point in time, Max was ranching Herefords. He knew his customers had never heard of Charolais and would not want to have anything to do with the new bulls. However, he knew that M. G. might be interested in them for his breeding experiments.

At the border, Max was informed that all bulls crossing from Mexico into Texas would have to be castrated, because at that time Mexico was trying to improve its genetic pool and did not want its best bulls being sold in the United States. But Max was a good friend of the border veterinarian, who told him that if he crossed the border during the lunch hour, the bulls might be overlooked, especially since Max would be crossing 1500 steers at the same time. That was exactly what Max did, and the two Charolais bulls, Blanco and Plato, crossed into the United States. Max gave them to his father, who remembered seeing some on his way to school in Germany in the 1880s and was intrigued by their body type. He began crossing them with Herefords and Shorthorns.

Some sources claim that the King Ranch was the first to bring Charolais into the United States. While they did import Charolais from Mexico, they did not do so until 1936, and correspondence between the Michaelis Ranch and the King Ranch reveals that when they did, they traded notes on the new breed with M. G., who had been experimenting since 1934. One of these letters, from Bob Kleberg to M. G., discusses the greatest fear of the Michaelis family at the time. It was 1938, and Mexican President Lázaro Cárdenas was breaking up the giant Mexican ranches as a part of his agrarian reform program. The last line of the letter reads, "I do hope the troubles in Mexico will not affect the good work that your son is doing, and that they will not take his

property away from him. However, it certainly does look black to me.”

Fearing the worst, Max began looking for other alternatives. He traveled to the West Texas looking for a ranch to lease until the trouble was over. David McKeller and his son Alden went with Max, Jr. to look at the 02 ranch near Alpine, Texas. After they had finished driving around the ranch in their Model A, Alden recalled that Max, Jr. drove to the top of a hill that overlooked the vast, barren landscape. Looking at it for a moment, Max, Jr. exclaimed “02 Hell!” He leased it anyway.

On April 10th, 1938, Helen gave birth to Maximo G. Michaelis III, their first and only child, in Austin. When Maximo was barely two months old, Max returned to Mexico to find out once and for all what was to become of El Fortín. He arranged for a meeting with Cárdenas in Mexico City. Cárdenas already knew who Max was and set him at ease the moment he walked into the room, saying, “Mr. Michaelis, you will never be bothered. What I’m attacking are these large landowners, including foreigners, who own hundreds of thousands — in some cases, millions — of acres and often never see it. We need this land for our poor people. And those places I’m going to bust up. You’re drilling wells, you’re fencing your own property, you live on your property [*at this time, most ranchers lived in town*]. As long as I’m living, you will never have any problems.” Max would later say of Cárdenas, “Yes, he was a communist, but he was a man of his word.” El Fortín was not broken up.

Max leased the 02 Ranch near Alpine from 1938 to 1941. The years 1939, 1940, and 1941 saw record rainfall in the region. In *The Last Campfire*, Ted Gray wrote that “...the Lykes brothers were in the market to buy a ranch. When they saw the lush 02, not realizing it was a once-in-a-

lifetime rainfall, they signed the contract almost immediately. Michaelis moved out, and the Lykes Steam Ship Company began stocking and operating the 02 Ranch.” Max made more money off the 02 than any of his other operations, and there were many of them. He purchased the Valentine Ranch near Marfa, which was large enough to run 2500 cows and 2500 calves on. His foreman, Frank Stockley remembered that during one of their roundups, people were stopping in the middle of the road, standing up on their cars, and taking pictures because they couldn’t believe how many cattle there were, and 2500 pairs of cattle are too many to work in pens, so it was being done picturesquely on horseback. Max moved the cattle that had been at the 02 to the Fort Union Ranch, north of Las Vegas, New Mexico. Because he wanted his son Maximo to be educated in the United States, he also bought the 1200 acre Los Olmos Ranch outside of Eagle Pass, Texas. Here, beginning in 1942, Helen served as Secretary of the American Quarter Horse Association, which she had helped to found. Unfortunately, Max and Helen now had to spend most of their time apart, she in Eagle Pass and he at El Fortín and his other ranches. By 1945, Max had so many operations spread out over such a large area, he had to buy a private plane. It was the first of 23 that he would own over the course of his life.

But Max had neglected one of David McKeller’s lessons, and it would come back to haunt him. When he had been staying with McKeller during the 1920s, McKeller had introduced him to an old banker who had said, “Max, let me tell you something. I’ve financed ranchers all my life. All big ranchers eventually go broke.” Max confessed that the scene haunted him for years afterwards, and with good reason. In 1946, he owned over half a million acres and was running more than 27,000 head of cattle on grass. He was overextended.

First, his right-hand man, Howard Raue, died on the Fort Union Ranch in New Mexico.

Then, when Max went home to the Michaelis Ranch for Christmas in 1946, the border shut down because of hoof and mouth disease, stranding 2500 of his steers on the Mexican side. They were the first of several shipments that he had contracted to sell in the United States for 17 cents a pound that had to be sold for the equivalent of 3 cents a pound in Mexico. When the border reopened in 1952, it was in the middle of a record-breaking drought that hit Texas that year and lasted until 1957. During the worst years, there was not a single bale of hay harvested in Hays County. To make matters worse, M. G. Michaelis, Sr. died on April 11th, 1950. Corrine Huettig, Max's aunt and boyhood companion, began managing the ranch and did so for the next five years. Max tried to make money by mining fluorspar in northern Mexico from 1952 to 1953. While the operation made money at first, it quickly slid downhill and ended up losing money in the long-run. Max realized that his big ranching days were over.

There are two major kinds of ranching, seed-stock breeding and commercial ranching. Seed-stock breeders develop and raise cattle that are the all-round best for the commercial rancher. The goal is to produce a cow that eats less, gains more weight, and can endure the harsher ranching conditions. The most pure form of seed-stock breeding is line-breeding. Line-breeding causes most of the herd to share a single, exceptional ancestor. All the master breeders throughout history have been line-breeders. Another, more colloquial name for line-breeding is inbreeding. A good line-breeder has to be extremely careful or he will destroy the herd. It involves a lot of research, and some pedigree studies go back as far as 25 generations. Max had grown up with a line-bred herd of Shorthorns and Herefords, but he had wanted to ranch big. Big ranching is always commercial because it is impossible to line-breed on a huge scale. However, while Max had been

running tens of thousands of cows on hundreds of thousands of acres, his father had been slowly line-breeding a herd of Charolais and Hereford and Shorthorn crosses on the 1700 acre Michaelis Ranch in Hays County. At the same time, M. G. had also been creating a market for the new breed in the United States, sometimes even giving away Charolais for free so that other ranchers could see the advantages of the new breed and therefore of the new Michaelis herd. The average life of a pure-bred herd in the United States is 6 years. At the time of M. G.'s death, the Michaelis family had been doing it for 70 years. And with Max's big ranching operations falling apart, he was ready to pick up where his father had left off.

To get back on his feet, Max sold 100,000 acres of the El Fortín Ranch to Joe Finley, the man who had bought the Carrizalejo Ranch from Austin Spurlock, who had bought it from George and Phil Walker. Half of the Los Olmos Ranch in Eagle Pass was irrigated, and he began shipping hay from there to the Michaelis Ranch in Kyle.

The original Pugibet herd had been bought by an American from Louisiana named Alphe Broussard in 1952. Once he had bought it, he traveled to Mexico to get permits to ship them into the United States. The border was open at that point, so there shouldn't have been a problem. The Mexican Minister of Agriculture told him that the permit would cost \$50,000. Broussard went back to the United States, raised the money, and then returned to Mexico. This time the Minister said it would cost him \$500,000. Infuriated, Broussard and W. L. Babb smuggled the cattle across north of Del Rio, near Langtry, and took them to Louisiana. They were caught and spent five years in jail.

In 1955, Max Michaelis, Jr., Anderson Coquat, and H. M. Kimble formed a partnership and negotiated with both the United States and Mexican governments to buy the smuggled herd for

\$1,000,000. The cattle were taken to El Fortín in January of that year but were confiscated by armed force and taken to southern Mexico in March. This ignited a political battle that Max waged over the next few months in Mexico City and Washington, D. C. The cattle were returned to El Fortín in August of 1955, but the entire calf crop had been stolen. The cowboys who had watched over the herd in southern Mexico said that every time a calf had been born, a truck with Texas license plates had driven up and carried it off. Whether or not these reports are true may never be known. Although he had regained possession of the herd, Max was unable to secure permission to bring any of its offspring across the border to sell in the United States until the middle of the 1960s.

Charolais began booming in the late 1950s, and Max was able to sell his bulls at \$2500 a head. Even though it was difficult to get cattle from the El Fortín herd into the United States, the herd on the Michaelis Ranch was able to put him back on his feet. His son Maximo graduated from the University of Texas at Austin in 1960. Maximo had spent every summer on El Fortín and had expected to take it over after he graduated, but Max sent him to run the Michaelis Ranch instead. The two ranches complimented each other wonderfully, and Maximo began pairing bulls from El Fortín with females from the Michaelis Ranch.

In twenty-five years, Max had made a lot of improvements at El Fortín. Throughout the 1950s and 1960s, it was the showplace for the Michaelis cattle. People would buy from Max just to open the door for an invitation to stay at El Fortín. The ranch took its name from a conquistador fort that had been built there around the time Coronado passed through on his way to conquer Cibola. The outpost was near a gorgeous spring surrounded by large trees, the last water on the road to Chihuahua, which lay 250 miles to the west. This spring was unusual because it bubbled

up out of the valley floor, unlike most of the other springs in the region, which were high in the mountains. The ranch had been part of the large Hacienda Zacate, and the ruins of the hacienda were on the ranch. In 1849, a group of prospectors heading for California had blazed a road through the Alameda Canyon, which still served as the best route to El Fortín. The land had been abused for centuries because of the nearby spring, but type of terrain kept it from being ruined. There were wild burros that used to run off with the saddle horses and wild cattle as well, but the deep soil allowed the country to stand stomping. After living in a tent for a year, Max and Helen had built a complex of adobe houses. In a move that he would later regret, he tore down the four-hundred-year-old fort and built a barn out of it in 1933. As he tore it down, he noted that the walls were full of lead from countless Comanche raids. He also built a swimming pool that was fed by the icy spring water and a hangar for his airplanes.

There were as many as 36 people working for Max at El Fortín at any given time. He insisted that every ranch hand have a tree and a garden, and he ran a school for their children. Littering was forbidden. People generally liked to work for him; if someone stayed a year, they usually stayed a lifetime. Many did not have houses in town, but lived exclusively on the ranch. Max considered it a personal insult if anyone left. It was very important to be trusted by the ranch hands. If the word got out that a landowner was unfair or untrustworthy, he would have to pay his men twice or sometimes even three times as much. Max never had that problem.

Max was the last rancher in northern Coahuila to use chuck wagons. David McKeller had told him in the 1920s that mechanizing a ranch would break a ranch. While he never took this advice to its logical extreme, he did not get rid of the chuck wagons. He always had three on El Fortín. One was always in use while the other two were being resupplied and refitted. Maximo

and his friend Jerry Rhodes once spent thirty days out with a chuck wagon without ever going back to headquarters. Chuck wagons allowed the ranch hands to work a full day's ride from headquarters for weeks on end in a landscape that was rough enough to ruin pickups. Max used chuck wagons until his death.

The mid 1960s saw a series of changes in the Michaelis family. Corrine Huettig died in 1963. Only two years later, on July 26th, 1965, Helen Michaelis died. She was buried in the Kyle Cemetery, near the Michaelis Ranch. Max married Joan Russell in 1966, a woman he had hired to help create the Charolais Herd book. Lillie Michaelis, the wife of M. G., died at the age of ninety on May 12th, 1967, leaving the Michaelis Ranch to Max.

The Charolais boom reached its peak between 1965 and 1971, but Max's marriage to Joan had caused tension with his son. Maximo's friend Luis Coq, another Mexican of French descent, told him, "Buy your dad's interest in that ranch [the Michaelis Ranch]. Forget El Fortín, you're going to lose that to your stepmother; that's already gone. If you don't do something here, she's going to wind up with everything." Maximo followed his friend's advice and bought his father's interest in the Michaelis Ranch in 1972. Mexico had always been the country he loved, though, and in 1973, he purchased two ranches near El Fortín.

Max G. Michaelis, Jr. died on the Gorriona, which his son had recently bought, on October 9th, 1976. Joe Finley, the owner of the Carrizalejo Ranch, found him dead with Joan passed out by his side. What killed him is not known for sure. Butane tanks can sometimes be used to store anhydrous ammonia, a poisonous gas, and there was a butane light in the room, so he may have been killed by a bad tank of butane. However, Maximo's foreman had seen the light working fine

the day before. No autopsy was performed, and the cause of death was assumed to be asphyxiation. It is also possible that Max was poisoned by his new foreman, who had coffee with him the night before he died. Joan was rushed to San Antonio where she recovered in the hospital.

Max's will left everything he owned to Joan. She was a good cattlemoan and was able to keep the herd going until she died in a car accident a year and a half later. After she died, El Fortín passed to her mother and out of the Michaelis family. When it came up for sale several years later and was bought by a Mexican official for well below its value, attempts were made to recover it in court. These attempts were not successful, and the appearance of impropriety and probable corruption was enough to make Maximo's lawyer say "I did everything I was supposed to do, but a black hand came in and took away our justice."

The new owners of El Fortín were not skilled enough line-breeders to sustain the herd, and it gradually degenerated. Maximo built a new herd in Mexico using what was left of the Michaelis herd at the Michaelis Ranch in Kyle. Today, it has reached the point where introducing new blood cannot benefit it; it is entirely self-sustained. Maximo married Sharon Brown in 1982, and their sons Max G. Michaelis IV and Carl Lawrence Michaelis were born in 1983 and 1984. The Michaelis family is entering its third century of line-breeding.

Over the course of his lifetime, Max Michaelis, Jr. managed not only to fulfill his dream of ranching big, but to carry on his father's tradition of line-breeding and to then pass it on to his son. He helped to introduce a new breed of cattle to the United States, a breed that has revolutionized ranching in North America. Lives as full or as influential are rare indeed. I have taken the time to record a bare sketch of his life so that future historians will have a framework into which they can fit the colorless deeds and records scattered from Las Vegas, New Mexico to Hays County, Texas,

to Melchor Músquiz, Mexico that mention his name but tell nothing of the story behind it.

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