

# CAMERA, LIGHTS... — HISTORY —

*Through his soon-to-be released film, “The Long Black Line,” marketing executive turned rancher Herman Wright hopes to inspire a generation to discover their rural roots.*



*Built in the late 1860s, the old family home is a gathering spot when Herman and Debra Wright, their daughters, Elizabeth and Lauren, and cousins visit their grandparents' East Texas ranch.*

On these visits, Wright explored his family history with cousins who owned neighboring farms and ranches. He helped make decisions about the cattle and crops, learning as much as he could from his father about ranching. He also revived childhood memories of summers he spent with his grandmother, Arvetta Wright, who had taken in laundry and sold vegetables to help finance construction of the Walnut Hill Rosenwald School so that her four sons would be educated.

**H**erman Wright Jr. never set out to be a filmmaker — or to be a rancher, for that matter.

A Los Angeles sales and marketing executive with a law degree under his belt, he had lived all over the country, building a successful career in the health insurance industry.

But six years ago, fate intervened.

Wright started making frequent trips from his California home to southeast Texas to help his ailing father manage the family ranch in Jasper County. Part of a former “freedom colony” near Mount Union, the ranch had been deeded to his great-grandfather, Benjamin Wright, in 1874 following Emancipation.



**“I hope the films will reach out and wake up a whole generation to find out where they came from.” — Herman Wright Jr.**



*Ben and Arvetta Wright stressed the importance of education to their four sons.*

And that's when it happened.

"I realized that this land is where my roots are. Even though I had grown up far from Arvetta, I realized it was she who planted in me the seeds of who I would become and how I would live my life," Wright comments. "I'm here because of a long black line."

He also recognized that the same held true for other African-Americans — people who, like him, have been able to seize opportunities because of the sacrifices made by parents and grandparents in rural communities.

It was, he decided, a story that needed to be told.

### A New Career in Film

In 2002, Wright formed a multimedia educational and entertainment company, MC3, with the purpose of telling history through video.

Researching his family tree and the history of Mount Union was right up his alley. "I was a history major — history's my first love — and I'm a storyteller," notes Wright, who earned his undergraduate degree from Texas Christian University and his law degree from the University of Texas.

Wright found virtually no recorded history of the Mount Union freedom colony because, he contends, the people turned inward for survival, practicing self-sufficiency to such a degree that the Great Depression had little impact on them. This lack of information challenged him to look deeper, conducting first-person interviews with old-timers and searching military and education records.

In 2005, Wright quit his career in health insurance, and he and his wife Debra moved back to Texas, buying a home in Houston's artsy Montrose district. From there, he could easily check on the ranch, 75 miles to the north, visit his mother and ailing father, and still commute regularly to L.A. and Virginia, where MC3 had offices.



*Herman Wright Jr., left, and his uncle, Clinton Wright, accept a 2007 Texas Land Heritage Award from Texas Agriculture Commissioner Susan Combs.*

The product of Wright's research, a 43-minute film entitled "The Long Black Line: An American Story," was completed last fall. But its release was overshadowed in January by the death of his father, Herman Sr., a retired Army lieutenant colonel and longtime businessman and civic leader in Jasper.

### Add Rancher to His Resume

Suddenly, Wright became a ranch owner as well as a filmmaker. In the process, he also became a customer of Capital Farm Credit, like his father before him. He sold the existing cattle herd and purchased 70 new cows from different stock, financing the cattle as well as real estate through Capital.

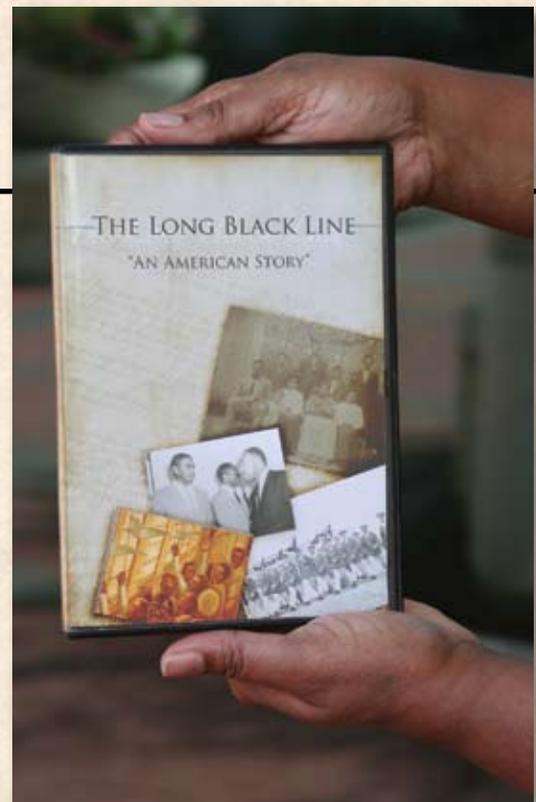
"It's a great banking relationship for the future," says Wright, who is planning to buy a small acreage that was in his mother's family. "They can collateralize things that other lenders can't, and they're competitive, too."

Working with his cousin, Alton Booker, a supervisor at Dupont and co-manager of the ranch, he has mended fences and improved the pastures in recent years. "We're bringing the ranch back," he vows. The Wright Brothers Ranch now consists of 450 acres, and Wright is prepared to buy additional land in the community, rather than see it sold outside the Wright clan.





Herman Wright Jr., left, poses with the crew filming “The Long Black Line.”



Janet Hunter

“The Long Black Line: An American Story” is a 43-minute film. It is the basis of a trilogy, now in production.

For the most part, however, the land in the Mount Union community continues to be owned by descendants of Benjamin Wright’s 21 children. Some of them farm or ranch part time. Booker, for instance, operates a vineyard that produced 180 bottles of wine this season. Still others live in the city and escape to their Mount Union homes on weekends and holidays.

For Wright, who spent most of his childhood in other states and foreign countries while his father served in the military, the land means “we’re part of something larger than ourselves,” he says. “It’s the definition of sacrifice — that our ancestors would put this together, knowing there would be a better day and that people like me would come along to continue the legacy.”

### One Film Turns to Three

That legacy is the focus of Wright’s film. Told largely through his family’s experience, it is the story of a people who rebuilt through the land, schools and churches of the freedom colonies — informal communities of African-American landowners who were former slaves — which once numbered in the hundreds across the country. Ultimately, though, it underscores the roles that family and community play in helping young people realize their goals.

The film might have aired in 2006, but Wright’s sponsoring television station, KLRU in Austin, convinced him that he had enough material for three films. Acting on their advice, he is now working on The Long Black Line Trilogy, which will consist of three parts: “The Building,” “The Bridge” and “The Restoration.” The names were inspired by the Old Testament book of Nehemiah, in which the walls of Jerusalem were rebuilt by the Jewish people after 70 years of captivity.

There are tentative plans for limited television screenings of the first Long Black Line video this winter. However, Wright expects that the trilogy will find an audience on public television, on TV history and geography channels, and even in high school and college classrooms. He believes its appeal as an historical documentary

will span cultural and social lines. Meanwhile, he is also working with a writer on a novel focusing on Arvetta Wright’s life.

“When history disappears, a portion of the soul disappears,” Wright says. “I hope the films will reach out and wake up a whole generation to find out where they came from.” ■ JH

## BE ALL YOU CAN BE

The United States Army should be interested in the second of three films that Herman Wright has in the works. And Wright, a 20-year marketing veteran and former Army captain, would be only too happy to provide the film for recruiting purposes.

To be titled “The Bridge,” the film underscores the role that the Reserve Officer Training Corps (ROTC) program at Prairie View A&M University and other black land-grant colleges played in developing military leaders during the Korean and Vietnam wars.

“Prairie View has more generals and admirals in its alumni — nine to be exact — than any other college in the nation, except the military schools,” notes Wright, whose father Herman Sr. rose to the rank of lieutenant colonel after graduating from the East Texas land-grant college.

“Eighteen-hundred young officers came from Prairie View. Even the farm-boys who didn’t go to college served in the military,” he adds. The film makes the point that military service was a source of pride among his father’s generation and proved to be their springboard to new opportunities.