

While studying at Fisk, Mollie met Benjamin F. 'Big Ben' Stevenson, a seven time All-American at Tuskegee Institute. Originally from Missouri, he'd earned a B.S. in Agriculture and Animal Husbandry from Tuskegee in 1931, and the two were married soon after Mollie's graduation from Fisk. They had five children.

Most of them graduated from college, maintaining the family tradition of education. Mollie, from a family to whom education had long been denied, joined her husband Ben to extend the precious gift of education far beyond their own family, through philanthropic contributions to other black students.

In the late 1940s the responsibility of the second-oldest oilfield in the state of Texas, which lies on the ranch, cast Mollie, Sr. suddenly into the world of big business, real estate, cattle ranching and oil and gas production. She rose to the responsibility with characteristic aplomb, and soon became known as a skillful negotiator among corporate giants from the oil and gas industry.

Ever generous with others, Mollie, Sr. and Ben opened Sky Ranch, a pilot's training school for blacks. Retired Air Force Captain Elton Ray Thomas and Hulon "Pappy" White, who had served as mechanics for the Tuskegee Airmen and were close friends of the Stevenson family, operated the school. This was during the era of segregation, when black pilots faced many barriers.

In that difficult era, the Stevenson's made the ranch a happy haven for thousands of children and friends. Students and teachers from Houston schools, along with other Houstonians and friends from across the nation enjoyed special events staged for their enjoyment – including picnics, train rides, rodeos, horseback rides,

airplane rides and Easter egg hunts.

Today, the most visible evidence of the Stevenson family's dedication to the preservation of heritage is the American Cowboy Museum, founded



Photo Courtesy of The Taylor-Stevens Ranch  
Mollie Taylor-Stevenson, Jr. teaches children the different historical uses of quilts.

on the ranch by Ben and Mollie's daughter, Mollie, Jr, more than a decade ago.

To introduce a new generation to their heritage, Mollie, Jr. offers school tours, informal lectures, horseback riding, a petting zoo — even catered birthday parties complete with hayrides — on the ranch. The "Historical Touring Exhibit" offers storytelling or mini-lectures on Black, Hispanic, Native American and women of influence in Western Heritage; living historians, video, art and creative writing, western arts, small petting animals, hands-on activities, ranch prizes and audience participation . . . all at

"budget prices." They also sell hand-crafted souvenirs at "kids prices."

Quilts play a large part in the "hands-on" portion of the exhibit. Mollie, Jr. says, "Houston has the largest quilting festival in the world, and they are so beautiful, but you cannot touch them. I marvel at the black quilting exhibits at the Museum of Fine Arts, and the Texas Southern University. But you cannot touch them."

"We have a large collection of quilts here, some of them dating back to the 1930's. We encourage the children to feel them, and examine the hand stitching. We hope they will be inspired to learn this fading art from members of their own families who quilt."

Mollie, Jr. is knowledgeable about the varied significances of quilting in African American culture. "Initially, they were made for cover for shelter and warmth," she explains. "But there are many other important facets, like the varied patterns that helped slaves remember routes they traveled, the number of knots signifying distance covered. Other quilts were made for healing, and taken into hospitals to wrap ill family members."

Even Mollie, Jr.'s passion for the quilting heritage dims alongside her contagious enthusiasm for cowboy and Western heritage. Her husband,



Photo Courtesy of The American Quarter Horse Journal  
Exhibit at the Taylor-Stevenson's American Cowboy Museum.