

Steadfast

Gene Meitler works hard to make Meitler Cattle and Heartland Hay the success stories they are today.

by **Robin Valek**



Gene and Kayanne Meitler work together to produce quality Herefords and miniature hay bales for specialty markets.



Gene Meitler of Lucas, Kan., is a firm believer in the philosophy of

sticking with what works. Gene and his family have made a name for themselves within the Hereford breed by basing the foundation of Meitler Cattle on more than 30 years of Line 1 breeding.

Since starting their breeding program, the Meitlers have continued to focus on Line 1 genetics. “We didn’t throw it out with the trash and chase the end of the rainbow,” Gene says. “We kept it and line bred it. While the industry chased fads, we stood fast. Now the industry is searching for what they have lost.”

While the Meitlers have been steadfast with their breeding program, Gene took a gamble 22 years ago when he started Heartland Hay, which has grown to sell more than 2 million bags of hay for the past two years.

Heartland Hay supplies product for both Kaytee Products Inc. and ZuPreem Premium Nutritional Products Inc. You will find the product available at Wal-Mart, PetSmart and other pet stores in the U.S., Canada and Puerto Rico.

Gene explains the idea for the company started after a discussion with Kaytee Products Inc. about the possibility of producing miniature bales of hay that could be used to

feed rabbits, gerbils and hamsters. “We remade the machine four different times before we got it to work,” he says. “We were determined to make it work.”

Heartland Hay turned back negative profits the first three years of business, but this was a niche market and Gene was determined to be the best.

Gene works with alfalfa hay and timothy grass. He pays a premium to the local farmers for their alfalfa hay, but the hay must be from third and fourth cuttings, perfectly green and picked through by hand to remove tree branches, leaves and weeds.

Gene ships in the timothy grass that is similar to brome grass. It is also picked through to remove any unwanted material. Products vary in weight between 14 ounces and 8 lb., with the density of a 50 lb. square bale.

“It is a lot of hand-shredding, but you have to do it to get the quality,” Gene says.

To increase efficiency the hay that does not meet specifications

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can be fed to his herd of Hereford cattle; thus no waste.

Gene is a very generous man who also believes in second chances and seeing the best in people. He has approximately 20 employees who work for him eight hours a day, five days a week. "I am blessed to have the employees that I do," he says.

About one third of these employees are either physically or mentally challenged. Their disabilities range from poor eyesight and the inability to drive to Down syndrome. "They work so hard and strive to please you," he says. "They are some of my best employees."

The warehouse is set up like an assembly line. There are stations to shred the hay, weigh it, bag it,

box it and load the hay onto the pallets and semis. The work is hard, dirty and monotonous.

"Don't pat me on the back; pat the workers on the back," Gene says. "I'm not a great businessman, but the process is so hands-on to keep the quality high that we keep the competitors away."

Heartland Hay is big business with two or three semis constantly on the road delivering product. Because of Gene's commitment in developing a unique business and through hard work, dedication and persistence he has made a success of Heartland Hay that compliments his successful Hereford herd. **HW**



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