

# Looking Beyond the Horizon



On Dec. 24, H.H. “Hop” Dickenson, retired American Hereford Association (AHA) chief executive officer, passed away quietly with his family in Overland Park, Kan.

Hop was a patriarchal personality among the “who’s who” of the U.S. beef cattle industry for nearly four decades. For 24 years he served as the AHA chief executive officer. In 2013, the same year as his passing, more than 450,000 head of Hereford and baldie finished steers and heifers went through the Certified Hereford Beef (CHB) program, producing nearly 50 million lb. of high-quality beef sold into more than 40 states — a record year since its inception in 1995.

In the same year as Hop’s passing, the Hereford bull market continued to expand in a robust marketplace. Last year, record prices for registered bulls and females reached an unprecedented mark, \$4,763 and \$4,202 paid for the average Hereford bull and female, respectively. In the toughest of times, great leaders have the vision to see beyond their own time horizon despite the fact that most people can’t envision the same outcome. Such was the case for Hop Dickenson. He deserves a great deal of credit for the success we are experiencing today.

Many of you lived it and know that prosperous times like the Hereford industry is experiencing today were quite the opposite a decade or so ago. It wasn’t too long ago when the Hereford breed faced the most trying of times and a decline in valuation and demand reminiscent of Hallmark Cards’ trials and tribulation these days.

Just as Hallmark has faced new challenges affecting the demand for the traditional mailed greeting card from



Hop Dickenson

competitive pressures such as e-mail, social media or inexpensive, high-quality color ink jet printers that allow Mom to make her own Christmas card, similar fundamental industry changes occurred in the 1970s and 1980s affecting the demand for Hereford cattle globally.

Much like Hallmark is facing today, the Hereford breed found itself out of position. By the late 1990s, the registrations of horned and polled Hereford cattle were 25% of their peak numbers in the early 1970s.

Hop, his boards of directors and boards of the former American Polled Hereford Association (APHA) all took a lot of criticism for the declining demand for Hereford cattle. However, a successful response to societal, consumer, or industrial changes does not always occur overnight, especially as it relates to turning the massive rudder of an entire industry. Today, we have the luxury of reflecting on

history and seeing the effect of Hop’s leadership and direction on today’s Hereford breed turnaround.

Two decisions made under Hop’s leadership proved to decide the relevance of the Hereford breed into the foreseeable future: 1) the merger of the horned and polled Hereford associations and with it the merger of two great populations of cattle, and 2) the start-up of a fledgling branded beef program — CHB LLC — launching the Association and its membership into the food industry.

In 1990 Hop and renowned meats scientist Gary Smith at Colorado State University discussed historic meat science research indicating that Hereford cattle had a propensity to produce a very tender and palatable steak. The two of them designed a three-year study to quantify the hypothesis that the Hereford breed possessed inherent beef quality traits that could command a premium in the marketplace.

Hop and then AHA President Tom Selman from Chadron, Neb., convinced the AHA Board that this benchmark research was necessary to find out where the breed stood as it relates to feedlot performance and end-product quality. During fairly difficult financial times, the AHA Board of Directors vigorously supported and funded the project.

As a result, science-based specifications were derived that provided a road map for combining both genetics and management strategies for producing high-quality beef in an economically viable manner. CHB<sup>®</sup> was born under Hop’s direction in 1995, refocusing

the Hereford breed on real-world economics and consumer appeal.

At the same time that CHB LLC was going through start-up pains, Hop knew that the association memberships representing the two populations of Hereford genetics must operate collectively under one association as opposed to being separate competitors. The typical corporate consolidation sales pitch was employed, “two organizations can build upon economies of scale, shared resources and collective direction,” but the long-term end result of the merger became much more profound than that. Over time, new relationships and partnerships have developed, prejudice, for the most part, has died, and a road of opportunity and prosperity has been paved for a new generation of Hereford breeders.

Today, the Hereford breed has made enormous strides in genetic improvement. Over time, the two populations have truly become one breed with different lines that can strategically be used in breeding decisions. The outcome of the AHA and APHA merger proved to blend the best genetics of both populations, allowing the breed to address commercial cow-calf market demands while delivering genetic power to the U.S. beef industry that is hard to quantify.

I know Hop was pleased with the success Hereford breeders are experiencing today. He kept up with our progress and read the *Hereford World* religiously while always being the sideline cheerleader for our cause.

For me personally, it was an honor to get my start in this business under him, and today we all have the blessing of 20 years of reflection to better understand what he meant to our industry. See Page 93 for more about Hop. **HW**