



Building Relationships

Ford County Feed Yard is honored with a Hereford Industry Innovator Award.

by Sara Gugelmeyer



Darrell Ailshie (left), Tennessee Livestock Producers general manager, Columbia, Tenn., and John Woolfolk (right), Columbia, Tenn., visited Ford County Feed Yard in September 2007 and had a chance to visit with yard manager Danny Herrmann (center). Ailshie and Woolfolk coordinate the annual Tennessee Hereford Marketing Program sale. Ford County has purchased several loads of cattle in the sale through the years.

Danny Herrmann is no stranger to feeding cattle; in fact, he was only 10 years old when his father, George, and partners bought Ford County Feed Yard near Ford, Kan., in 1972. His first job there was anything that needed doing, like washing water tanks and painting fences. Upon his return from college at Kansas

The search for excellence

George Herrmann – A man for his time.

George Herrmann may have turned the day-to-day chores over to his sons, but he certainly keeps up with every aspect of the industry and implications issues may present for the far-flung business he and the boys have built on Kansas' High Plains.

Doing what came naturally

At first, Herrmann was not going to tell me his age as he sat at his desk at Ford County Feed Yard, east of Dodge City, Kan. His eyes twinkled as he admitted to being 83. During our interview, he traded cattle and talked about a land sale on the phone while he discussed the issues of the day with me. Everyone should be so well informed.

"The cattle industry has been good to my family and me," Herrmann says. He and his wife, Pauline, raised six sons and a daughter down the road from the 55,000-head capacity feedyard north of the tiny town of Ford, Kan. Herrmann lost his son Mark in a plane crash several years ago, and Pauline passed away late last year. Herrmann stays busy, tending to the business at hand.

"My first love was trading cattle," Herrmann says, and he is very specific about the type of cattle he likes to work with. He prefers



lightweight lean cattle, not those 600-lb., "sappy" calves that someone else has "spoiled."

"Many years ago, I was telling my cattle broker, Jack Black, that we had too much sickness in our cattle," Herrmann says. "So Jack said that we needed to look at Mexican cattle because they never get sick."

Black found a load, so Bill Ferguson, the Kansas attorney general, and Herrmann went down to look at them.

"I can see it to this day," Herrmann remembers. "Bill was a little short guy and here we were. I was looking over the fence and Bill was looking in between the first and second rails at those Mexican steers. He didn't like them and asked Black if he could take them back. I thought they looked like 500-lb. cattle that needed groceries." Over Ferguson's objections, Herrmann bought the cattle and made \$95 per head. Herrmann became a fixture on the border, feeding literally hundreds of thousands of Mexican cattle over the years.

Even with the new farm bill and impending implementation of COOL, Herrmann is still buying cattle

State University in 1985, Danny began managing the family-owned growing yard. In 1990 he moved to the feedyard as manager and continues in that capacity today.

The Herrmann family operation is just that, centered on family. Danny is in charge at the 55,000-head feedyard, and brother John operates a 3,000-head preconditioning lot where many of the cattle are started before going to the yard. "John is in charge of our calf-starting segment of the operation, and he watches over the different yards that we contract out to start and grow calves," Danny says.

Also involved is Danny's brother Ronnie, who oversees the family's farming enterprise. "He looks after a lot of the Hereford calves that we buy in the fall and spring of the year out on wheat and grass pasture," Danny says. "It takes all of us to make it work."

Danny's father, George, is now 83 but is still involved in the family businesses. (Read more

about George in "The search for excellence.")

Danny is also a family man — he and his wife, Colleen, have three boys: Tyler, who is a student at Fort Hays State University, Colby, a junior at Dodge City High School, and Trent, who is a second grader.

The Hereford connection

Since 2004, when Ford County Feed Yard became a Certified Hereford Beef (CHB) LLC licensed feeder, Danny has been a great ally for the Hereford breed in the feedlot sector. He has also been feeding Hereford Verified program cattle since the program's inception in 2005. For this loyalty the American Hereford Association (AHA) Board and staff honored Ford County Feed Yard with the AHA Hereford Industry Innovator Award. The award was presented Jan. 15 at the National Western Stock Show in Denver.

When AHA staff approached Ford County Feed Yard about getting involved in Hereford beef



Danny says he enjoys working with customers, helping them understand feedlot and carcass data and helping them figure out how to improve their product.

programs, Danny says he was excited about the opportunity. "We thought about it and we had not really done any alliances with packers, but we thought here's an opportunity where we don't see a lot of people involved in it," he says. "So we decided to go ahead and get involved and grow out of the deal."

Another reason the Herrmanns were eager to get involved in the Hereford programs was that Danny's grandfather had raised

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from across the border. "Surely there will be a grandfather clause or something," he says.

Herrmann's son John starts a lot of the cattle that go into the yard, purchasing many of those from Capitol Land and Livestock in Schwertner, Texas. "He gets along well with them," says Danny Herrmann, manager of the family operation.

Changes and changes

COOL is just one of the many changes that Herrmann has seen. And right down the road, the High Plains Packing Plant (aka National Beef Packing Co. LLC), built right after Herrmann built Ford County Feed Yard, may soon be National Beef Packing JBS. Herrmann has no problem with that. "If the government leaves them alone, why not?" Herrmann says. "As a matter of fact, I was always leaning toward joining the packers," he laughs. "If you can't beat them, join them, but I never could get it done. I always felt it would eliminate some of the risk."

And life has been a bit riskier of late as the family and the company feeds more and more cattle. Like other feedyards, customers are harder and harder to come by.

According to Danny Herrmann, one successful change has been signing up with the Certified Hereford Beef®

program. "It has worked very well for us," he says. "We were always looking for a niche, and this one seemed natural."

George Herrmann's father raised registered Herefords near Jetmore, Kan., so the program was an attractive legacy for the family. Several thousand Herefords are currently on feed at the yard.

Changes in the grain business have been a surprise. George Herrmann never thought he'd see \$12 wheat. "And we sold some at \$12," Herrmann says.

The family farms a large number of acres, raising wheat and alfalfa in the area.

The ethanol boom does not get Herrmann's blessing. "My major complaint is that the government is financing it," Herrmann says. "They should let prices reach their own level. The same is true for distillers grain. It has to be able to compete with the other feedstuffs. Meanwhile, we are feeding high priced grains."

As to the future, Herrmann thinks the industry may be in for a couple of rough years, but he's not deterred. He remembers 1974 when he was broke and nobody knew it. "Then I said something to my banker and he told me that he certainly knew it; they just didn't know what to do about it," Herrmann chuckles. "We've had tough years before," Herrmann says. "But we've always come through them."

At 83, Herrmann seems to be getting set up for the next fight.

— **Betty Jo Gigot**

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“Ford County has helped re-establish the bar for Hereford feeder cattle bidding on thousands of loads of Hereford-influenced cattle.”

— *Jim Williams*

Hereford seedstock. “In the 1950s my granddad had a registered Hereford herd,” Danny says. “When the Hereford Association approached us, my dad was excited and talked about the herd they had when he was younger.”

The nearby Dodge City, Kan., packing plant owned by National Beef Packing Co. LLC agreed to harvest the Hereford cattle and retail the beef, an arrangement which Danny says allowed them to create a unique marketing agreement that was advantageous for everyone involved.

Once the program was in place, the only thing left was to get the cattle. Danny sought out Hereford and Hereford-influenced cattle to buy and feed and also to feed for those who wanted to retain ownership. He now feeds between 20,000 and 25,000 head of Hereford-influenced cattle a year. He’s been instrumental in the success of regional Hereford-influenced sales across the country, including those in Tennessee, Illinois, Missouri, Minnesota, South Dakota, Montana and Kansas and multiple video livestock marketing sales.

In the last five years, Ford County Feed Yard has become one of the most prolific buyers of Hereford feeder cattle in the country. But, CHB LLC Vice President of Supply Jim Williams says, “The impact made by Ford County many times goes undetected with the countless

times it was runner-up bidder whether in the country, at the sale barn or on the video. Ford County has helped re-establish the bar for Hereford feeder cattle bidding on thousands of loads of Hereford-influenced cattle.”

Profitable relationships

Danny says he appreciates the working relationship he has with Jim. “Working with Jim, he’s helped a lot in getting the cattle to us, whether we’re purchasing them or finding someone that wants to retain them,” Danny says. “We’ve built a relationship there and it’s good. You want to do business with someone that you trust, and I think we have that relationship where we can trust each other, and we’re fair with each other.”

Feeding Hereford cattle has helped the feedyard’s business as well. “It goes back to working with customers and trying to build up a customer base,” Danny says. “That was one of the goals from the beginning. It’s another avenue to pick up new customers. If we do a good job, people will come back.”

One of the advantages to selling to Ford County, or feeding there, is the producer can get performance and carcass data back on the cattle. Danny says that’s one of his favorite parts of feeding cattle. “I enjoy getting data back for these producers,” he says. “Like going to Tennessee and buying the cattle down there, they’ve got a lot of smaller producers, and we can group them up and get data for them and help some of the producers in understanding how the cattle finish or what’s going on. We hope they are learning from the experience.”

Williams says, “Danny’s taken a lot of our producers to a new level, helping them understand the performance of their cattle and giving them the ability to collect valuable carcass information without maintaining ownership through the feedlot phase.”

Danny says he likes to feed Herefords because of their performance in the feedlot. He has been impressed with the Herefords’ feed efficiency and average daily gain. “Performance is our main concern along with conversion, cost of gain and health.” He says, “Also the program has given us the opportunity to meet a lot of good people in the industry.”

The feedyard staff is always working to provide the best they can for their customers. In 1998 they proved that commitment by spending \$3.5 million on a new, state-of-the-art computerized feedmill with micro ingredient technology. “We are continually looking at ways to invest in our business to offer our customers the very best in technology and service,” he explains.

Another service offered at Ford County is the certification needed for source and age verification for export. The feedyard is one of National Beef’s largest export-eligible cattle suppliers, which results in more marketability for the cattle fed there.

Even with the tough climate for cattle feeders right now, Danny says he is optimistic about feeding Herefords. “The feeding industry right now, with the losses they’ve been experiencing, there’s some problems out there, but that’s not a breed-specific issue,” he says. “So then you’ve got to look at the Hereford deal, and if the packer will keep pushing it on the retail level, I think we can keep growing.”

He adds that he appreciates the producers’ help as well. “I talk to a lot of different producers and they try to think up different options or different marketing ideas to get the cattle to where we can get them in the yard and on to the packing house. I appreciate their help and hope that producer support continues to grow.” **HW**