

Engineer

John Oltman has spent decades balancing two businesses: producing Herefords and batteries.

by Sara Gugelmeyer

JIt may seem like an unusual combination, but engineering, specifically battery engineering, and Herefords are two interests and businesses splitting John Oltman's time. John lives at Mount Horeb, Wis., where his Foggy Hollow Farm produces top quality Hereford seedstock. Also, in nearby Madison, he spent nearly 33 years working as an engineer for Rayovac battery company.



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The Hereford operation is something the whole Oltman family is involved in. Now that includes John's grandchildren, like Ryan (pictured here) who is now 6 years old.

John got his start in the battery business in 1964 when Rayovac hired him. He says, "I was hired to work in research and development on new battery systems with various applications."

In 1979 John started a project for hearing aid batteries, which would make him well-known in the industry and lead Rayovac to be the most dominant manufacturer of hearing aid batteries in the world.

"We were very successful as a company in that project," John says modestly. "I, with a team, developed the technology and chemistry for hearing aid batteries."

He says for 18 years he was either the lead engineer or manager on the project, resulting in 40 patents for the technology with Rayovac. In fact, the technology he and his group developed is the only chemistry being used today for hearing aid batteries.

Meanwhile, in 1967 John bought the farm he would later name Foggy Hollow. At first, his father, who was a corn, hog and beef farmer in northern Illinois, used the land to run yearlings in the summer. After a few years, John bought some commercial cows and officially entered into the cattle business. Over a number of years, John says, he gradually moved into the registered and purebred Hereford business. He served as president, secretary and director of the Wisconsin Beef Improvement Association.

Foggy Hollow Farm has always been a family affair with John's wife, Chris, and daughter, Beth, helping with the cattle. Chris is now a retired nurse, and Beth is a marketing specialist at Meriter Hospital in Madison. But as a youngster, Beth was very active in Hereford associations.

Beth showed polled Herefords through the Wisconsin Junior

Polled Hereford Association and was the state queen in 1994. She competed in a number of junior nationals and was named Miss Congeniality in the National Polled Hereford Queen contest at the Kansas City national. In addition to showing, she competed in team marketing and illustrated speech contests.

John also employed some help for the farm, more or less depending on his demanding work schedule.

John explains that he was "liberated" of his employment with Rayovac in 1997, but that didn't slow him down any. He started his own worldwide consulting business, Key Consultants, to help other companies with battery technology. He says there are only six manufacturers of hearing aid batteries in the world, so it is a very specific field.

His consulting business took him many miles from home and Herefords. "I had 20 trips a year for many years," John says, "and they were week-long trips or more. I spent half my time on the road."

At that time, having good help for the Hereford operation was critical. One man has worked for him for 30 years on a part-time basis, mainly in the evenings. "But, I hired other help when I was gone a lot," John says. "I had to have someone for morning, noon and night, and it was not the same person, so communication and work ethics were important on their part."

Still, they were able to make it work. For example, "In 1998 we never lost a calf, and I was on the road half the time," John says.

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Now, the consulting work is slowing down. After traveling so much, John says, "Travel is less alluring to me. I am still consulting; if I can find someone who wants to know what I can impart to them, then I will certainly help them, but it's less often."

When John was working for Rayovac and traveling so much consulting, the cattle were a good stress reliever. "When I was fed up with the technical side and the politics, I could come home and vent a lot of it with work," he says.

Foggy Hollow currently consists of 66 females, 14 of which are

first-calf heifers. John says he markets all his calves as yearlings. He's been testing bulls at the Platteville, Wis., test station for 25 years. Foggy Hollow has sold bulls to studs as well, including ABS Global and Accelerated Genetics. In 2006 John and Chris were inducted into the Wisconsin Polled Hereford Association Hall of Fame for their contribution to the breed.

Although the cattle operation is therapeutic and enjoyable for him, John says it's too big and involves too many business decisions to be considered a true hobby operation, and, as such, he runs it like a business.



John and his wife, Chris, were inducted into the Wisconsin Polled Hereford Association Hall of Fame in 2006.

And a successful business is something John's no stranger to, whether it's Herefords or batteries.

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