

Loyal

Ronnie and Thelma Mills got their start in the Hereford business with a pair of bulls given as a birthday present.

by Megan Galloway



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Most birthday presents come in boxes wrapped in pretty paper tied up with neat bows. Husbands seeking the perfect first birthday present for a new wife often find themselves helplessly searching through counters of jewelry or attempting to locate the perfect-size clothing. Instead of subjecting himself to this sort of tiresome hunting, Ronald Mills had a different idea — one that couldn't be wrapped up with a bow but a gift that would far exceed even the most expensive jewelry in his wife's eyes. Thelma Mills' first birthday gift from her new husband was a pair of Hereford bull calves.

Those two bull calves were the foundation for what became, and still is, the thriving Hereford operation of R&T Acres in Libertytown, Md. Although, to most newlyweds, a pair of calves may seem like a very unusual gift, to Thelma, it was perfect. Both Ronnie and Thelma grew up involved in dairy cattle operations, and their love for cattle continued into their adult lives. "We both love cattle and wanted to have a few around, but we knew we didn't want to milk twice a day," Thelma says. Ronnie's brother-in-law, Mervin Lee, worked for prominent Maryland Polled Hereford breeder Col. E. Brooke Lee, and Mervin's influence led Ronnie to

select Herefords when purchasing the pair of birthday bull calves.

"We thought they were going to be just feeder steers," Thelma says, "But when we went to castrate them, Mervin told us that one of the calves was just too good to castrate and suggested that we should show him. He held his own in the showring against some pretty good cattle and that was it — we caught the bug."

That show bull soon had a cow mate added to the Millses' herd, and from there Ronnie and Thelma slowly built their program. R&T Acres has remained small in numbers but emphasizes quality over quantity. Located in central Maryland about equal distance between Baltimore and D.C., the Mills run about 10 cows on approximately 25 acres. Through extensive artificial insemination (AI) utilizing prominent, popular bulls, Ronnie and Thelma have built a respected herd of competitive cattle that work for them. Now that they are both retired, Ronnie is able to live out his dream of working on the cattle operation full time, and the Millses are currently utilizing embryo transfer to further propagate the genetics they've carefully cultivated since 1971.

Reaching this point has been a journey filled with pleasant memories of great cattle and great people. "When we first got into it, there were a lot of prominent breeders in Maryland," Thelma says. She and Ronnie were influenced and aided in building their herd by Leland Clark of Spring Valley Farms, Fred

Archibald and Dr. Jack Shanks — their vet and a man who was instrumental in helping them get into showing cattle. “We were very lucky to have so much support from such wonderful people,” Thelma says.

R&T Acres was originally located on just 10 acres, and since Ronnie worked in construction, Thelma worked part-time and stayed home with the kids and cattle. She learned to do everything from feeding to calving to AI. Due to time and land constraints, their focus has always been on using the best AI sires possible to produce the best cattle possible from their existing cow herd rather than attempting to purchase females. “We’ve never been in a position to go out and buy top-of-the-line cattle,” Thelma says. “But through AI and hard work, it’s our goal to produce the best possible animal we can.”

This philosophy has driven the Millses throughout the last four decades — and it is one that has paid off. They take special delight in producing an animal from their breeding program that can compete successfully on local, state and national levels. Ever since that first bull calf, Ronnie and Thelma have been active participants at shows ranging from their county fair to state and national shows.

Thelma notes that a heifer they raised and co-own with Tara Hausner, a junior from Pennsylvania, was successfully exhibited at the 2009 National Western, where she stood second in a tough open show class, beaten only by the eventual champion female — a placing Ronnie and Thelma both are exceptionally proud of.

Since they can only maintain a small herd due to land limitations, R&T Acres annually consigns top quality bulls and females to various state sales and have frequently sent top-sellers through the ring at the Celebrate Maryland sale. They also

have a strong bull market based on their good genetics and good dispositions that are essential for the many small herds in their area. Steer calves are often sold as 4-H projects to area youth and other heifers are offered privately as junior projects.

Ronnie emphasizes that they never sell customers anything they

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wouldn’t keep themselves — a fact that has helped them develop an excellent reputation. “We just love to sell heifers to youth and follow them through development,” Thelma says. “We just never seem to sell one and really get rid of it!”

Of course, showing continues to be an important part of Ronnie’s and Thelma’s lives, and they were fortunate enough to find someone as dedicated as they were to exhibiting their cattle competitively. Unfortunately, none of their seven children nor any grandchildren have developed their passion for the showing.”

Kevin Stiles lived near their first farm and became involved in helping the Millses with their cow herd and show cattle. Even after they moved, Thelma says distance never mattered, and Kevin continues to run things whenever she and Ronnie are away. Kevin has become instrumental in getting their show cattle ready and presented at their very best. He’s one of the many wonderful people they have been blessed to know during their time in the cattle business.

“Having cattle has been such a joy,” Thelma says. “The Hereford people, maybe cattle people in general, are the most joyful I’ve ever met. We’ve been lucky to know so many of the great

breeders and spend time with so many tremendous people.”

Their love of both the cattle and the people led the Millses to become active in state and national Hereford associations. Both Ronnie and Thelma have been on the board for many years and each has served as president of the Maryland Hereford Association.

Thelma is currently serving as the treasurer and is also an active Poll-ette. She has served on the National Organization of Poll-ettes board and was secretary/treasurer of the group.

Thelma’s enthusiasm for the Poll-ette organization — along with a little encouragement from Helen Hartfield of Ohio — led Thelma to initiate the creation of the Maryland Poll-ette group. “The Poll-ettes are a support group to the main association,” she says. “We try to divide our resources between both the junior and adult associations.” The group sponsors scholarships, assists with the state queen program and also puts on a lunch at the state show for the Hereford exhibitors.

With such dedication to the improvement of their own herd and the well-being of the breed, it’s no wonder that in 2007 Maryland Hereford breeders selected R&T Acres to be inducted into their Hereford Hall of Fame — an honor both Ronnie and Thelma are proud of. And despite so many wonderful memories and quality cattle, the Millses are still striving to improve their herd and make the best possible Herefords they can, all while enjoying the great people they’ve met and continue to meet along the way. **HW**