

# Setting a Direction

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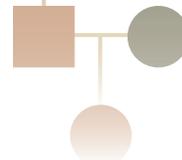
The Debter family plans ahead to ensure  
a bright future for their Hereford farm.

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by Danielle Beard Hayden

**W**ith the purchase of two registered Hereford heifers, Glynn Debter, Horton, Ala., began his career in the cattle industry. What started as a boy's 4-H project in 1948 has grown into a 67-year, well-established, multigenerational Hereford farm.





In the beginning years, Glynn and his father, Ross, had a successful egg operation, raising more than 1.5 million laying hens along with their cattle. However, in 1980, when the competition moved from family-owned egg producers to corporate-contracted egg suppliers, he realized it was time to phase out that part of the farm.

### Growing the herd

“We got our cattle numbers up in the early ’70s, so it ended up being an easy transition out of the egg business,” Glynn says.

Over the years, Debter Hereford Farm (DHF) worked to improve its herd genetics, establishing a relationship with Cooper Hereford Ranch in Willow Creek, Mont., and Holden Herefords in Valier, Mont. The relationship between DHF and these ranches is so important that Glynn has only missed one Holden Hereford bull sale since 1971.

According to Glynn’s son, Perry, purchasing genetics from these ranches has allowed DHF to hone in on the qualities that are most important for its own breeding program — soundness, fertility, slick hair and good disposition.

In 1972 DHF held its first production bull sale, offering 40 two-year-old bulls, 20 registered females and 40 commercial bred heifers. The sale has continued to grow ever since. This October approximately 120 two-year-old Hereford bulls and 250 commercial females will be offered at the 2015 sale.

“What’s neat is the commercial heifers come from our customers,” Perry says. “Mose Tucker is one bull customer that had commercial heifers in our first sale 43 years ago and is still consigning high quality black baldie heifers at the Debter bull sale to this day.”

DHF sells to 16 different states. The growth in demand for its cattle keeps phone calls pouring in year round requesting bulls.

“We are a family operation only. We don’t have any outside hired help,” Glynn explains. “The bulls are developed in groups of 20-30 and raised on pasture and hand-fed soy hull pellets and commodity byproducts once a day. Because of this we don’t have the time to have multiple sales per year.”

Although the family stays true to old-fashioned values when it comes to their customer service, having more work to accomplish than what their small family staff can handle has accidentally incorporated modern practices into their sales.

“We have a lot of YouTube videos,” Perry says. “We sell about 250 commercial heifers for our customers. Part of us selling our customers heifers is we make a video for them, since we don’t have

the ranks to bring them all in for the sale we make videos of them and sell a lot of cattle that way.”

### Working together

While the original 40 acres of the Debter homeplace has the seventh generation of the family residing on it, on this family operation, three generations currently work together on a daily basis. Glynn, 81; Perry, 57; and John Ross Debter, 29, manage the cattle while Glynn’s wife, Bobbie Debter, and Carrie Debter Robinson juggle the many roles in the office. Adding to the family work force, Carrie’s husband, Steve Robinson, joined the ranch in January of this year.

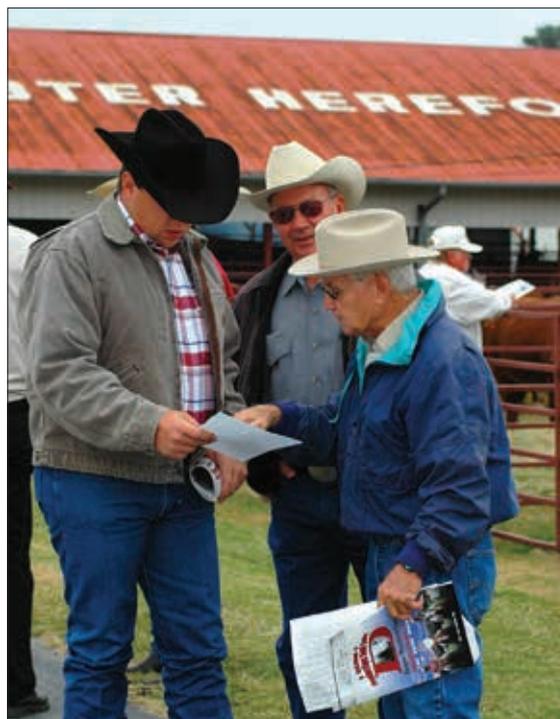
“My mom kept the books for the farm for years and at age 81 she still keeps the financial records up-to-date,” Perry says. “Even at times when she was keeping books for five different businesses, she always put her family first. These days she has a lot to do with raising her six grandchildren.”

The family live as each other’s neighbors; six homes are located on Debter Herford Farm with a total of 14 family members occupying the place.

Working and living side-by-side with immediate family might be difficult for some families, but for the Debter family, life together is a well-oiled machine.

“We could all go out and build a fence three different ways, but the end result would be exactly

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Scott Haynes, Glynn Debter and Mose Tucker look over information at the Debter Hereford Farm Bull Sale.

the same,” John Ross chuckles. “The only way we make this work is that we all have the same thoughts about what the farm or cattle need. Anything we do we have discussions and because we all think the same in terms of our foundation — the cattle — we can work to agree on everything else.”

The youngest Debter working on the farm, John Ross, said it’s a privilege to work the same land as his family.

“I’m very fortunate, I’ve been here my whole life and it doesn’t feel like I get up and go to work. It’s not a hassle, it’s my whole world,” he says.

While the fourth generation currently at DHF may not be officially employed Glynn explains three-year-old Kanin has already been bitten by the cattle-lovin’ bug.

“Not too long ago John Ross went to Georgia to haul cattle,” Glynn says. “He left early in the morning, so when Kanin woke up he asked his mom, ‘Where is my dad?’ She told him he was heading to Georgia and he said, ‘Get him on the phone, I need to talk to him.’ She called John Ross and Kanin said, ‘Make sure you close the gate on the trailer.’”

Glynn, Perry and John Ross laughed in agreement regarding Kanin and his old soul.

### Stronger together

One downfall to an operation entirely operated by family is occasions when the family needs to leave the farm.

“No matter what, there are always two of us on the farm to take care of chores or anything else that could arise,” Perry explains. “We take turns



Glynn Debter spends time with great grandson, Kanin Ross Debter.

and have discussions about who stays and who leaves. John Ross’s kids are active in sports and we’re all active in our community differently. Sometimes we have to juggle schedules, but we make it all work.”

Beyond naturally feeling the same toward most topics, the Debter men largely credit capitalizing on one another’s personal strengths as a benefit to their business and to maintaining an excellent working family relationship.

“The good thing is we have different talents,” Perry says. “Where one person is strong the others may not be and you just put those pieces all together and it works.”

According to Glynn, one of Perry’s strengths is working with people.

“He spends a lot of time on the phone,” he adds. “Our customers depend on him.”

Perry explained John Ross’ help around sale time is invaluable.

“We provide free delivery for our bulls and John Ross does most of the delivery,” Perry says. “He spends about 35-40 days after the sale delivering bulls, which is a big help, that way I can take care of chores on the farm.”

Delivering the bulls to their new homes is an important part of the customer service DHF tries to provide its customers.

“When you can visit their farms you can see what type of cattle they’re producing,” John Ross says. “That way when or if they return to our sale, we have a better idea what kind of bull they need and it helps us figure out where we need to change our program to fit our customers’ needs.”

The family all agree that conflict is not that hard for them to avoid.

“We all get along and we don’t have to work at it. It’s so natural for us because we respect each other,” John Ross adds.

Jokingly, Perry mentioned that while they do get along there are those little things individuals do that don’t jive well with one another.

“One thing John Ross and I do differently is I can never manage to get my saddle and tack put up to his expectations. Either the bridle is not left in the correct place or I’ve used the wrong saddle blanket,” he laughs. “But that is about as much conflict as we have.”

Their willingness to work well together isn’t the only benefit they’ve found in one another for business.

“We all three have different connections,” Perry explains. “People my dad knows, sometimes I don’t



Perry Debter manages Debter Hereford Farm, along with his father and son.

know and people I know, my dad doesn't and the same with John Ross. So when we go to visit we go three different directions. We're fortunate enough to have all three of us here, in three different stages of life and I think that gives us a business advantage in bringing a turnover of customers."

Keeping to the subject of capitalizing on one another's strengths and connections, Glynn tells a story on John Ross.

"It was funny, about four years ago, a guy called John Ross to help gather his cattle up, and wasn't aware of who or where John Ross came from," Glynn says. "The guy asked him, 'what kind of bulls would you recommend?' John Ross told him, 'I would get good Hereford bulls.' The man asked where he could find those and John Ross told him, 'Debter Herefords, they have good, stout bulls.' So about two months later I was talking to this same man at our sale and he pointed at John Ross and said that is the guy who told me to come here. I laughed and said of course he did, that's my grandson, he's quite the salesman."

"He never asked my name and I never told him," John Ross laughs.

### Helping the next generation

Besides its annual bull sale, DHF hosts various events to give back to the cattle industry.

"Since this operation started with a 4-H project, we decided to encourage and work with the youth, especially the Hereford youth. We have also hosted college judging teams and cattlemen's associations field days and tours," he adds.

DHF has held the district 4-H livestock judging contest for more than thirty years and opens its facilities up each month for the Cross Roads 4-H Cloverbuds meetings.

The farm's proactive community involvement accompanied with the Debtors' reputation for superior cattle has not been overlooked. DHF was awarded the BIF Pioneer Award in 1995 and Seedstock Producer of the Year in 1995 by the Alabama Purebred Council.

Glynn has been inducted into the Alabama Cattlemen Hall of Fame and the American Hereford Association (AHA) Hall of Fame and served as the 1988 president of the AHA and as chairman of the AHA from 1995-1998.

Perry served as the president of the Alabama Cattlemen's Association in 2005 and currently



John Ross Debter says it's a privilege to work the same land as his family.

serves as the president of the Alabama Hereford Association. Following in his father's footsteps, he has also been inducted into the Alabama Cattlemen Hall of Fame.

"There has only been one other father and son to both be admitted into the Alabama Hall of Fame," Perry says.

As an operating generational farm it may come as no surprise Glynn, Perry and John Ross are already thinking about the generations that will follow them.

"It's one of my personal goals that my great-grandson can grow up and become a part of this — providing he wants too," Glynn acknowledges.

In order to set up a future for the next generation, Perry explains the farm strives to set directions instead of goals.

"There's a fine line between the two," he says. "But when you set a direction you never completely get where you want, if you set a goal you may achieve it and then have to set another goal. By setting a direction we are continuously working on a certain path. Setting a direction is really about the next generation, working for yourself you see a lot of things to do different immediately,

but working for the younger ones makes you look at things from a large timeframe — none of this is temporary, it's for someone else. We take care of the land and we take care of the cattle and we sure don't misuse either one." **HW**

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**Perry Debter**