



Herefords in the Outback

Adrian Spencer and his family of Ironbark Herefords have been raising Hereford cattle in the Barraba district of Australia for more than 80 years.

by *Bridget Beran*

Settled into the eastern edge of Australia, Ironbark Herefords has grown into the largest registered Hereford operation in the country, it also expanded its views to Russia, Kazakhstan and the U.S.

Originally started as a bull-breeding unit for the Ironbark Pastoral Company in 1933, Ironbark Herefords now raises seedstock, produces commercial cows and calves, backgrounds feeder steers, and cattle for the domestic and international markets. Owner and operator



Adrian Spencer's family has been raising Hereford cattle in eastern Australia for 82 years.

Adrian Spencer says his family also uses a buyback program with their bull clients' steers so that they can keep accurate records of exactly how their bulls' progeny are performing.

Spencer's grandfather, Edward "Ted" Spencer, founded the Ironbark Pastoral Company, and the family has continued to be active and successful at Ironbark Herefords. As some of the first Europeans to settle in the Barraba area, the Spencers and their operation have a long history in agriculture. Adrian is now passing

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on his love of the breed to his three children, Hugh, Ben and Isabella.

“I’ve always grown up with deep respect for the forebearers — my mother and father David and Margaret Spencer and my grandfather — as they gave many sacrifices in their lives so the young people could live a free and prosperous existence,” Adrian says.

Adrian’s father served in World War II, and his mother’s father served in both World War I and World War II, and Adrian says this tradition of service meant that he grew up with high expectations of being successful with what was left in his care. And Ironbark Herefords has risen to the occasion, hosting big sales and exporting Hereford cattle to other areas of the globe. Adrian recalls when they shipped about 1,800 heifers to Russia four years ago as one of their proudest moments.

“We were always brought up to enjoy our work,” Spencer says. “Being a good stockman has been second nature to us and we have always enjoyed it.”

Committed to growth

The Spencers now run about 1,400 registered Hereford cows with another 400 commercial cows and host their annual bull sale in August. As they go into their 42nd annual sale, Adrian says they expect to sell about 200 bulls, as per the usual. They also often sell around 150 more bulls through private treaty. The sale of females, which are exported throughout the year, is often handled by other breeding programs.

“We background 3,500 steers in a 12-month period for our export and domestic feedlot,” Adrian explains. “Our cows are all purebred Hereford cows, and the steers are a multitude of breeds being predominantly Hereford and black baldie. We try to buy at least a 50% infused Hereford to enable the cattle to grade MSA [Meat Standards Australia].”

While he may have been born into the breed, Adrian says his experience with Herefords internationally has continually reassured him why the breed was the right choice. After working in the U.S. in the mid-80s, he says he gained a deep appreciation for the genetic strength of the breed.

“I have seen Hereford cattle in South America, Canada, Russia and Kazakhstan, so I have been fortunate to see that Herefords have global demand, that is a factor in why I breed Herefords,” Adrian says.

The dry, arid landscape of Australia also encouraged Ironbark to stand by its hardy Hereford cattle. Especially after facing droughts, Adrian says that Herefords can handle the challenge of surviving in Australia better than any other breed. Weather challenges can often present stress and fertility issues for cattle Down Under, but Adrian has found Ironbark’s Hereford cows can tough



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through the rough times and still produce a calf each year. Despite its harsh climate, he wouldn’t trade his homeland for anything.

“Australia is still the land of opportunity,” Adrian says. “I guess what really grabs me about it all is the wide open spaces, a lot of wonderful cattle country and we currently have a very good federal government that is right behind agriculture and with the growing demand for quality beef into Southeast Asia, I think the best times in agriculture are ahead of us. For young people who are capable, agriculture has an exciting future for them.”

American influence

While Australia may be home, Adrian has also made great connections abroad, especially in the U.S. He worked for BB Cattle Co., Connell, Wash.; Lonestar Hereford Ranch, Henrietta, Texas; and

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Adrian says he has gained appreciation for the genetic strength Hereford offers.

Ochs Bros., Gunnison, Colo., early in his career, and he has continued to have a relationship with American Hereford breeders — most prominently, Holden Herefords in Valier, Mont.

“Adrian had been by our place once while he was working in the U.S. and then we ran into each other at a conference in Russia when we were both presidents of our boards,” Jack Holden says.

Adrian recalls Holden’s presentation about his cow herd and how he decided that Ironbark’s cattle could benefit from what Holden’s cattle brought to the table.

“I thought to myself they are the most uniform and feminine line of cattle that I have seen and we at Ironbark breed our cattle that way,” Adrian says. “Ironbark

Herefords are renowned for uniformity so I decided to start using Holden bulls and that has been the smartest move I have made since being in the industry.”

It has worked well for the Spencers over the years, and Adrian says that he’s found the cattle handle the Australian countryside better than any others have. Incorporating American genetics into Ironbark’s breeding program has added consistency, udder quality and femininity to its herd, as well as adding pounds to calves at weaning.

“Australian Herefords have traditionally had an average name in heifer calving, and I have fixed that up in our operation and a lot of my



Incorporating American Hereford genetics into Ironbark’s program has strengthened maternal traits of the herd.

clients’ operations with a big introduction of Holden Hereford bulls,” Adrian explains. “The generations of documented birth weight back on either side of the pedigree has been an enormous boost to productivity in my operation.”

While Holden’s has been exporting internationally since the 1990s, Jack says he is glad its relationship with the Spencers has grown. Since Holden’s began exporting cattle to Ironbark in 2008, the Holdens and Spencers have gone from being just business associates to being friends, and while Jack was in Australia in 2012, he was even able to visit Ironbark Herefords for its bull sale.

“It’s a lot of quality cattle. They believe in what they do,” Jack says. “We’ve really enjoyed

it. The people are really nice and it’s beautiful country and I’ve really enjoyed working with Spencers. It’s been a pleasure all the way around.”

Though Angus is still the leading breed in Australia, Adrian says he thinks the Hereford breed has a tremendous opportunity for growth there, especially because they are the only other breed that consistently grades well. A growth in the breed internationally also bodes well for domestic breeders.

“I think it’s good anytime we can get American genetics and compete head to head with Australian or South American or United Kingdom genetics,” Jack says. “Any place we can get genetics out and show how well they do is a positive for us. It’s another market and another income stream for breeders. And I’ve always enjoyed visiting with people who are in the Hereford breed from all over the world and doing what we can to help improve their herds.”

And, American genetics definitely have a place in the Outback as far as Adrian is concerned.

“I have always looked at America as being the leader in beef cattle genetics,” Adrian says. “You have had a few big years with the beef market and the whiteface are really on the move in your country and that will flow on to other parts of the world. But genetically you have a big responsibility because America is where the genetic building in beef cattle comes from.” **HW**



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