



Wilma and Virgil (center, seated) surrounded by their children and grandchildren in 2003.

Faith, Family, Herefords

The Staab family has relied on three constants through good times and bad.

by Sara Gugelmeyer

It's not hard to get Virgil Staab to say what's on his mind. Whether it be about politics, religion or cattle, he'll come right out and say it. But deep down, below his intimidating German accent, there's tenderness there, and it's hard to miss when he talks about his faith, his family or his beloved Herefords.

Virgil is now the retired patriarch of Virgil J. Staab & Sons Polled Herefords, Hays, Kan., which is run primarily by his sons Brian and Tim and grandson Nathan.

Although Virgil and his late wife, Wilma, had six children, two Brian and Tim are the main two involved in the cattle and farming operations now. Also Nathan, one of Tim's sons, has returned to the family business to work fulltime as well.

Together they raise Hereford seedstock and all the necessary

feedstuffs as well as wheat, milo and dryland corn on the family's land near Hays.

Remembering the past

Virgil may have taken a step back from the farm and turned the daily labor and decisions over to his sons, but his mind is sharp and he speaks of the past as if it were yesterday.

"My grandpa and grandma migrated from Russia, but they were of German descent," Virgil explains. His family had fled Germany generations prior because of persecution, and they did the same in 1892 when they came to America.

"I was telling my grandkids this story, and they asked what kind of house my grandparents had when they got here," Virgil reminisces. "I said, 'What house?' There wasn't one thing here then. They lived in a dugout for 21 months.

When they got a little bit of money saved, they built a shack to live in. They didn't borrow money to build a \$500,000 house, they lived in what they could afford."

Virgil reiterates no one had money then. "When my grandpa came here he bought a quarter of ground for 1,700 bushels of wheat. No money was involved. It didn't make a difference whether the wheat was worth \$.05 a bushel or \$5 a bushel, he had to deliver that amount of bushels to the elevator in Hays."

Virgil says, "It was tough. My dad always said, 'We never went hungry, but we ate a lot of molasses bread.' But they survived."

Virgil speaks of his parents and grandparents with admiration for what they endured so that he and his family could be successful. "My grandpa said it wasn't any worse coming over here and having nothing than staying there and having nothing. That's what people did back then, migrated out because their country wasn't worth nothing."

The Staab family is not unlike many families in Hays and the surrounding communities. Much of that area is comprised of German Catholics who migrated to Kansas around the turn of the century.

Virgil explains that his Catholic faith started early, formed when he was a child attending church with his family, and has remained strong through many challenges.

He and Wilma married young and spent 51 and a half wonderful years together, raising six children. She died suddenly of a heart attack more than eight

years ago. "It's been tough," Virgil says. "It's tough being alone. She's not here anymore but I think of her everyday. She was a wonderful woman and we had a good life. But, the Lord wanted her more than I did. I've got to accept it."

Virgil's son Brian, who manages the cattle side of the family operation now, admits that it was a tough time for everyone, but especially Virgil. "I know my dad was really hurting at the time, being an old German guy that had never cooked or washed clothes ever in his life. That was a big change for him. Without family and faith it would be a lot more difficult."

Virgil's grandson Nathan says that although it was a hard time, the family pulled together. "Grandma was a huge part of the operation," Nathan says. "She made sure she fed us well so we got the work done. There was always a big breakfast. She'd cook us lunch and then during harvest when we were in the field, she'd cook supper and bring it to us as well. That was a big change, but the family was able to pull together and now Brian's wife, Tonya, and my mom (Gail), they're taking on that role of cooking for us through harvest."

Another difficult time for the Staab family was when Tim's eldest son was diagnosed with Gamma Interferon Receptor Deficiency, a rare condition, which causes increased susceptibility to certain infections. He passed away when he was only 8.

It was a tough time for everyone, but the family pulled



together through faith. “I was young then,” Nathan explains. “I was just a year younger than my brother. So all in all, it was difficult for me to understand. I remember asking, ‘If there is a God, then how can He do this to my family?’ But through our faith and family and loved ones, the pain slowly goes away. He suffered during the short period of time he was on Earth, so knowing that he’s in a better place and not hurting definitely does help. I’ll see him again someday.”

With two grown daughters, Brianne and Tasha, Brian says he felt helpless watching his brother lose a child. “I think the Lord has been the healer through these times. It was hard for me to imagine how you could lose your own son and make it through it. It’s tough.”

Tim was working as a farm mechanic in town at the time, but after his son passed away, Tim returned to the family operation.

“We got through that with a lot of prayer,” Virgil says. “You can’t give up your religion in those tough times. It hasn’t always been a bed of roses.”

No one would claim that. In addition to those deaths, the family has pulled together through Brian suffering a heart attack, Tim enduring hip replacement and shoulder surgeries and many other smaller challenges. Through it all, the family has remained strong in faith and commitment to future generations.

Just as Virgil’s grandfather and father helped him and his brothers get into the business, Virgil has helped his sons and grandson.

“Now on the farming operation, we’ve gotten to the point where the ground is split up in different names, but we all farm together,” Brian explains. “That’s how we got started. My father helped us get started as soon as we got out of high school. He was lenient on what we had to pay. There was a lot of times he was paying for our fertilizer just to help us get started.”

Brian continues. “My dad used to farm in partnership with his brothers and we watched them and their work ethic. We always helped as much as we could, but the work ethic they showed us in the long run has affected us for years to come.”

The next generation

Nathan is one of the latest generation to put the Staab family values to work for him and his family. At 28 years old, he and his wife, Cindy, are raising their three children in the farming lifestyle.

“Ever since I was a little kid, I’ve been tagging along with Brian, helping him out,” Nathan says. “I worked on the farm all through school.”

When it came time to choose a college, Nathan decided to stay close to home and attend Fort Hays State University in Hays, Kan., so he could continue helping out.

Upon graduation, Nathan moved to Kansas City to work as a grain merchandiser for ADM. “I was across the state and too far from home,” he explains. “I was spending a lot of time on the road driving back and forth so

I could put in a little time on the farm on the weekends.”

That’s why he jumped at the chance to move home and work at the co-op in Hays as the agronomy salesman. He worked there for four and a half years before the time was right to return to the farm full-time. “With my dad getting older I decided to make a change,” Nathan says. “He was going in for hip surgery around that time and he was going to be unable to work for a while.”

That was in March 2012, and the family business has been grateful for him ever since. Nathan primarily works on the cattle side of things where Virgil J. Staab & Sons Polled Herefords is doing well despite the drought.

“Our No. 1 customer is commercial breeders,” Brian explains. “So our goal is to attempt to put the highest efficiency animals out there for commercial breeders to put in their herds.”

With about 98% repeat customers, the numbers show that the Staabs are meeting their customers’ needs. Demand is good although the cow herd has been downsized to about 240 head because of drought.

In every aspect of the operation, the Staabs’ faith shines through. Virgil says, “We are going through a tremendous drought here. I lived through the ’50s drought and that was not near what we have got now. We’ve cut back on cattle, but they need something to eat. We’ve always relied on Him to help us out. One of these days when the Lord thinks we need rain real bad, we’ll get some rain.”

Despite drought years, Brian and Nathan agree that using technology has helped improve their cattle. All calves are backgrounded to about 800-850 lb., then the steer calves are sent to Ford County Feed Yard, where they qualify for the Certified Hereford Beef (CHB®) program. Extensive rate of gain and carcass data are used in decision-making. Also all bulls and replacement females are ultrasounded in the spring.

Each year 30 to 40 replacement heifers are retained in the herd, and the remaining heifers are sold as breeding stock. “They are sold as registered or commercial all over — New Mexico, Colorado, Missouri — and a lot in Kansas. Two years in a row we sent all our heifers to Russia in the package deal Topp Herefords put together,” Brian explains.

Contrarily, Staabs’ bull customers are more local. “The farthest customer would be about 120 miles away,” Brian says. “Most of those guys come in and buy three to five bulls at a time.”

The operation uses artificial insemination (AI) extensively to improve and make changes in the herd.

Nathan is trained in AI, and he and Brian work together on getting everything synchronized and bred.

“What I know about cattle and farming, I’ve learned most of it from Brian,” Nathan explains. “Even though I’ve only been back to the farm full-time for a year now, we’ve worked hand-in-hand for about the last 20 years. We just flow really well together, a lot of times not a whole lot of questions are asked; we just do it.”

Brian agrees, saying that he thinks everything works better when it’s family doing the work. “What’s really unique is the efficiency of the operation. If you look over the past 10 years of our operation, we’ve gotten much more efficient. I don’t have a hired man like I used to. We have more free time than we’ve ever had and we’re farming more than we did five years ago.”

Although the Staabs employ no full-time help, during harvest a local man helps out, just as he’s done for the past 15 years. Also Brian and Tim’s younger brother, Tom, takes time off from his construction job in town to help.

It’s all about family. “I am not going to lie, when we were younger, we had our squabbles, and once in a while being family, we might have tension one or two days. But overall everyone has their responsibilities and if someone has issues the rest of us just pick up the slack,” Brian says.

The Staabs also do a good job of passing the torch to the next generation. The Staabs always take cattle to local shows and, especially, to the Kansas State Fair in Hutchinson. Brian has handed those show responsibilities over to Nathan. And last year, Nathan’s younger sister, Emily, tagged along to help. Their younger brother, Connor, is interested in the family operation as well.

“My grandpa and Brian have always been mentors to me,” Nathan says.

And he hopes he can help his younger siblings get involved as well. And it’s important to know that while Nathan is “in charge” of showing the Staab cattle now, him being in charge



Virgil and Wilma were married 51 and a half years when she passed away suddenly, leaving Virgil to rely on his faith and family.

doesn’t mean the entire family won’t be there.

“We always joke around that Grandpa will beat us there,” Nathan says. “He basically got us started showing cattle, but he says he doesn’t like to go spend a lot of time at the shows. But we no more than get there and unloaded and there’s Grandpa visiting and looking at our cattle. He’s been around a long time so he knows breeders from all over the state and the United States. He’s seen all the different types of cattle and how cattle have changed from then to now. He’s got a very vast knowledge about the entire breed and how it has evolved. It’s been a lot of fun learning from him.”

Virgil isn’t alone in his support of the family’s show string. “When it comes to show day, everybody shows up — the entire family.

“On show day, everybody is there to help get everything ready and get the cattle in the showring,” Nathan says.

Like many cattle-oriented families, the Staabs know that the shows are a time for fun as well. “We work hard when there’s work to be done, but we also like to have a good time,” Nathan says.

Virgil adds, “It’s a wonderful time with a lot of the Hereford breeders. I sometimes talk to the boys about people I met 50 years ago at those shows.”

Everyone agrees that faith, family and Herefords have been good to the Staabs, despite some tough times. Brian says, “We are blessed to say the farming and cattle have been great to us. In the last 10 years it’s been fantastic. There is nothing I would change about it right now.” **HW**



The Staab family won best six head at the Kansas State Fair in 2006.