

Junior Merit Trip Reflections



by **Emilie Miller**

It was an honor when the National Junior Hereford Association (NJHA) recognized me for my dedication to and passion for the Hereford breed and its members by selecting me as the 2005 recipient of the National Junior Merit Award.

Along with a monetary award, which was put toward furthering my education at Kansas State University, I was given the opportunity to travel to any Hereford ranch in the country. I immediately decided to go somewhere I have never been before, and determined that going west of the Rockies — perhaps to “Cali-forn-i-a” — was a perfect choice.

Between college classes and club activities, livestock judging practice, and interning with Fort Dodge Animal Health this summer, I was faced with the challenge of finding enough time to take advantage of this once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. So while the traditional experience of past recipients of this award was to

spend a week helping out around the farm or ranch of their choice, I had to take a different approach.

I was invited to join the Hereford Youth Foundation of America (HYFA) board of directors for their annual spring board meeting, which was going to be hosted by board member Marcia Mickelson, of Sonoma Mountain Herefords, and her family, in Santa Rosa, Calif.

My trip began when Chris Stephens, a man we all know and respect for his dedication to Hereford youth, and I arrived in northern California on a beautiful day in April. While the board spent the weekend in meetings, I joined Marcia’s husband, Jim, son Bobby, and AHA fieldman Mark Holt for a tour of the Mickelson’s 2,000-acre estate.

Their ranch is nestled in the hills of the Sonoma Mountains, just west of Napa Valley, with breathtaking views no matter which direction you look, be it the top of the Golden Gate Bridge in the distance, or simply the cattle grazing on pastures

adjacent to some of the oldest grape vines in California, dating back more than 100 years. I was even fortunate to capture some of this amazing scenery with my camera, which went on to win two blue ribbons in the photo contest at this year’s Junior National Hereford Expo (JNHE).

As an added bonus to my already amazing trip, the Mickelsons felt that this East Coast girl needed to get her feet wet in the Pacific Ocean, which is just 15 miles down the road from their home. So not only did I see Hereford cows and bulls, but also I saw seals that were sunbathing on rocks along the coast. I also was thrilled when Chris told me that on our way back to the airport we had time to cross the Golden Gate Bridge and go on a bay cruise which included traveling past the famous Alcatraz Island, and then riding a cable car to downtown San Francisco.

But what truly made this experience rewarding was the time I was able to spend with fellow Hereford breeders on the HYFA board, and the entire Mickelson family. They are some of the most genuine, hospitable and knowledgeable people I have ever met.

Bobby never ceased to amaze me when he would rattle off the pedigrees of every cow, calf or bull we saw, along with their show record if they were once part of the show string. Marcia and I were able to reminisce and compare experiences serving as national directors, their daughter, Jamie, showed me pictures of the family’s show animals proudly displayed around their home, and Jim shared with me the history of the ranch and where they plan to take it in years to come.

The junior merit scholarship is something I encourage all juniors to apply for. It is truly unique in that you are given such a wonderful opportunity to meet a Hereford family from anywhere in America and create a connection that allows you to continue to learn from them for years to come.

I would like to express my sincere gratitude to the Mickelsons for their generosity, and to Jerry Gay and Harding and Harding Insurance for making this experience possible through their sponsorship of the scholarship and continuous support of Hereford youth. I would also like to thank the HYFA board of directors for allowing me to accompany them and for their dedication to the investment in the lives of juniors — the future of the breed and industry.

I can remember sitting at the awards banquet at my first Junior National 11 years ago, in Louisville, Ky., and wondering if one day I too would have my name called to come forward and accept an award. Little did I know the journey God had in store for me over the next decade.

This summer, returning to Louisville for the JNHE — the same barn, the same showing and some of the same faces from all those years ago when my journey began in this Association — put everything into perspective. The NJHA is more than just an association. It’s a family of some of the greatest people on God’s green Earth, who all just happen to raise some of the greatest cattle too!

And while my journey as a NJHA member and director has reached its end, I will take with me the memories, the friendships, the respect and the pride for the Hereford breed and the people who make it the great family that it is. **HW**



California dreamin’? With a backdrop of Hereford-covered hills, Jim Mickelson truly wears a hero’s white Stetson for helping make my National Junior Merit Award “dream trip” a great experience. Bobby Mickelson, right, also shared his day with us, along with information about his family’s operation.



Bobby and I pose for a photo by the family’s business sign that helps to bring customers to the ranch for evenings filled with wine and great food. Of course, our evening menu featured Certified Hereford Beef.



Jim and Marcia’s hospitality helped to make my inaugural visit to California one that I will always remember. Their business, which combines Hereford cattle and wine from some of the oldest grape vines in California, provided me with an educational experience that this East Coast farm girl, who has now touched the Pacific and Atlantic oceans, will remember forever.