



People Person

Paul Slayton shares about his time on the Board, careers, cattle.

by *Sara Gugelmeyer*

There's been one constant in Paul Slayton's various positions in the last 30 years: people. In all the jobs he's worked since college, he has, in essence, been a people manager. That's something he's enjoyed,

and it has also taught him valuable lessons he's used when serving on the American Hereford Association (AHA) Board of Directors. Now that his four-year term has ended, he reflects on the years spent serving a breed and industry he loves.

The son of sharecroppers, Paul Slayton was raised on his family's livestock and cropping operation in west-central Illinois. He attended college at the University of Illinois and graduated with a bachelor's degree in animal sciences.

He searched for a job in livestock communications working for a publication or a company for which he could travel around the region. But, unable to find his "dream job," he worked for Ankony Angus for a few years. Then opportunity came looking for him. "The polled Hereford association kept my application on file, and one day Johnny Winston called and said the fieldman job was open," Paul explains.

He interviewed and was hired in 1973 as an American Polled Hereford Association field representative. It was during this time that he met the daughter of Wisconsin Hereford breeder Warren and Isabel Brown. Paul and Bette married May 4, 1984.

After seven years as a fieldman, he was hired to manage the

Polled Hereford World and moved to Kansas City.

But he missed production agriculture and wanted to get out of the office. So he went to work for Falklands Farm near Schellsburg, Pa., in 1983. He managed the farm and Hereford cattle for Mr. and Mrs. Leon Falk for 10 years but says there, too, he was managing people more than cattle.

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Falk died in 1988 and the farm had a dispersal in December, but Falk's widow wanted to keep a few replacements and try to rebuild the herd. "We kept a core group of 30-35 head in partnership with Mrs. Falk," Paul says. It wasn't long before she decided she no longer wanted to own the cattle, but she continued to lease the place to Paul. "We kept those replacements and started building our own herd of Herefords, Angus and Gelbvieh," he says.

The Slaytons moved to their current farm near Bedford, Pa., in 1995, and in 1999 Paul was hired as the executive director of the Pennsylvania Beef Council. Prior to his hiring, Paul had served on the board of directors for the Pennsylvania Cattlemen's Association and the Pennsylvania Beef Council, so he thought it would be a good fit. It was, and he continues to work for the beef council in that capacity today.

Paul's wife, Bette, is the president and CEO of the Bedford County Development Association. Between their two careers, not



Slayton says working with cattle and horses on the farm after a day in the beef council office is a great stress reliever for him.

much time is left to spend with their cow herd.

The Slaytons' Beardance cattle operation consists of 50 cows, half of which are Hereford and the remainder Angus and recipients. They sell bulls each year to commercial customers, who mainly have black cows, Paul says. Annually a few steers are kept, finished and sold in the strong niche market of locally grown beef. Replacements are kept, and the remainder are sold as youth show prospects or in a feeder calf pool, depending on the market and quality of the calves.

Paul was elected to the AHA Board in 2006. He has served for several years as chairman of the Hereford Publications Inc. (HPI) board and on the breed improvement and marketing committees. "It was natural to stick me on the HPI committee because of my experience with the magazine in the past," Paul says.

He says he is proud of how HPI has created additional income through Creative Services. "While advertising has declined, creative services has picked up the slack so that every year (I've been on the Board) has been a profitable year for HPI.

"The marketing committee has also been really fun because they've developed, since I've been on the Board, two really great advertising campaigns," Paul says. "And it is really exciting, and it's a direct result of what the breed improvement committee has been working on. There's all this data and research that's been compiled and now we can talk facts instead of perceptions on how efficient Herefords are. And we can put some monetary values on why Hereford, in a crossbreeding program, is real and useful. There are a lot of issues that both committees get involved in, and it's really the heart and soul of the industry."

Paul's experience on the Board has been aided by his position with the Pennsylvania Beef Council.

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Stewards of the Land

Paul and Bette Slayton received the Pennsylvania Cattlemen's Association (PCA) 2009 Environmental Stewardship Award at PCA's annual membership meeting in State College.

The Slaytons' Beardance Hereford and Angus operation includes flat and rolling pastures, forested mountain ground, four mountain-fed streams and a 1-acre pond. Working with the U.S. Department of Agriculture's (USDA) Natural Resources Conservation Service and the Department of Environmental Protection, the Slaytons have established 21 stream crossings, which include 11 cattle crossings and 10 bridges; four miles of stream bank fencing; and 8,300 feet of cross fencing for rotational grazing systems. Nowhere on the farm do cattle have access to drinking water in the streams other than at crossings or from stock tanks with gravity-fed, piped-in water from the mountain streams.

"It's really important to us — conservation practices for soil, water and wildlife," Paul says. "So ever since we've lived here, we've tried to fix our stream banks and partner with USDA conservation programs to plant trees and to continue to build a conservation plan for the whole farm. Now we're finally just about finished with everything as far as fencing, rotational grazing systems and conservation practices."

Using the Conservation Reserve Environmental Protection Program and working independently, the Slaytons have planted more than 1,800 trees on their farm since 1995. Selective timbering in 2006 took out rotting, diseased, mature and low-quality trees and enabled new forest growth for more browsing area for mountain wildlife including deer, bear, turkeys, rabbits, squirrels and other species native to the area. "We want to make sure that we conserve the wildlife habitat because we have a lot of wildlife in our area. We don't want to disturb the habitat but even enhance it, if we can." HW



“I think one of my strong suits is that I have worked with boards. I have been on boards, and as executive director, I work with a collection of boards constantly — not just the beef council but also the state and national beef quality assurance boards and the affiliate cattlemen organizations.”

Sometimes, though, Paul’s commitment to the beef council interferes with Hereford events he would like to attend. He says someday he would like to retire or slow down his work with the beef council and spend more time with cattle and on the farm and attend more Hereford events,

but he doesn’t have a schedule of when he will do that. “Someday, my dream would be to retire from this position to become a full-time cattle producer.” Although, that would mean he’d have to end his 30-plus-year career in people management. **HW**

Q&A with Paul Slayton

What do you think we need to work on as a breed?

I think, as an Association, we need to continually strive to develop revenue sources where our revenues are not just from registrations, transfers, memberships and such but we are also providing services to other associations or affiliates that have a need that they are too small and need to contract with other organizations for services. ABRA (American Beef Records Association, AHA’s wholly owned subsidiary that offers registry and performance recording services to five American breed associations) is a great example of how Craig (Huffhines) and staff have been creative about putting together what we can do because we have the human resources to do things that we are doing for ourselves that we can hire out to do for others. I think that is a great example of how we have to continue to offer those contracted services to develop additional revenue streams. I think, as an Association, that’s paramount of importance because it’s costing more and more to operate every year.

I am not sure I am the expert on what our breed needs to work on to improve our baseline cattle traits. Personally I know what I want to do, but I am not sure I should tell everyone else that we need to increase our carcass database, we need to select for better calving ease or lighter birthweights — some of the things that I am plugging into our herd. But that is not necessarily a solution to a lot of people. I guess what makes the Association work so well is that everybody has the same tools to use. Everyone can use all the tools available to make a better breed and breed better cattle quicker. And if they don’t, they are going to fall behind and not have the genetics and the base they need to contribute to what the commercial industry is demanding.

What are the biggest challenges you’ve faced as a Board member?

The biggest challenge that our Board has had to face in my four-year term was the advent of genetic defects coupled with the technology to test and identify the carriers. The other thing that I think history will show, because I am an optimist, I think that we guided our breed through a devastating economic recession. Last year it was pretty surprising news

that Hereford registrations were up. That’s unexpected because of the economically depressed business climate and depressed markets resulting in lower beef demand. There’s a number of things that we should be proud of in spite of the negative business climate; our registrations and transfers, due to encouraging sales, are pretty healthy. History will show what the challenges were and I think that the period that I spent on the Board will be known for how the breed leadership, staff and breeders together determined how to handle genetic defects — that was easy to understand and manage — and how to breed around those problems.

When you were elected to the Board, what were your goals and how have those changed over the years?

I really didn’t come on to the Board with any agenda. I was flattered to serve, but as far as what my goals were for the Association I can’t really say that I had any aspirations to accomplish any one thing during my time on the Board. I wanted to be a team player, and I thought my background enabled me to provide input and direction. One of the great things about our Association is they are abreast of the needs so all you do is need to just buckle down and provide whatever input you can and advice as a breeder. I think my 10 years of background having worked for the Hereford Association really qualified me very well in that I could speak on behalf of all breeders whether they be small or large, horned or polled or east, west, north or south.

What do you think it takes to be a good leader?

I think a leader has to not be driven by ego at all. What I perceive to make a great leader is that you’ve got to be able to follow and lead and provide insightful understanding on what the issues are, support and understand others while providing positive, constructive input to the process. To be a good listener is critical. While hoping to reach consensus may often be the driver, it’s also important to note that consensus, while the popular opinion, does not always result in the right answer. **HW**