

# HEREFORD

The voice of the American Hereford Association | January 2018

# WORLD

## A Market-led Cross

Doolittle Wagner Ranch LLC is bringing Hereford back into its black-hided herd.

by *Julie Mais*

A successful business doesn't happen by accident. Keeping a careful watch on market trends, penning accurate records and taking advantage of new technologies help keep any business venture thriving.

Jim Doolittle and Karen Wagner of Doolittle Wagner Ranch LLC in Buffalo, S.D., have built upon their lifelong passion of ranching to establish a progressive commercial cattle operation by making market-led decisions, maintaining extensive records and utilizing new practices in their herd.

Natives of western South Dakota, the couple grew up in farming and ranching families. Karen's grandfather homesteaded in Harding County, where her parents eventually farmed, cut hay and ran cattle. Jim's grandparents also homesteaded in the area around the turn of the century. On the open range, his grandfather grazed sheep and later converted to raising cattle. "My family had Hereford cattle, and at that time Hereford was the majority breed in the region," Jim says.

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Jim and Karen of Doolittle Wagner Ranch are working today to establish a legacy for their children.

Jim and Karen, who both worked full-time in education and administration, eventually purchased the ranch from Jim's parents. The property is not tillable, and the 13,000 acres are best used for grazing.

In 2009 the couple dispersed the cows, retained the calves and, for the past 20 years, have been raising a mostly black-hided herd. Each year they calve out around 500 cows with the majority of them being artificially inseminated (AI). Jim was an early adopter of AI and has been utilizing the technology for more than 50 years — both he and Karen are AI technicians.

They also employ Chase and Angela Kari, who have young children Sage and Tenley, to help run the day-to-day management. The cows are bred AI in groups of 150 to 200 using an AI protocol. Heifers are bred to calve in late February and into March, and older cows are bred to calve at the end of March.

Because of their extensive use of AI, Jim and Karen have kept detailed breeding records along with health records. Vaccination schedules for the herd are put in place with input from their veterinarian.

Today, Doolittle Wagner Ranch focuses on moderate birth weight and strong performance to market bred heifers. "We have repeat buyers," Karen says. "We have people coming back to purchase heifers because of the quality."

### Bringing back Hereford

While Jim and Karen have utilized Hereford genetics in the past, it wasn't until a few years ago they again started breeding a group of their Angus-based cows to Hereford bulls. "We understand the advantages of crossbreeding," Jim says.

Karen adds, "Our choice to add Herefords back in about three years ago was market-led. There's a demand for F1s. We like this cross and have used them in the past."

In a cross with Angus, Karen says Hereford adds performance and growth — qualities she says pay in their area. "The F1 baldies

are desirable for those who want replacement females and feedlot steers," she says.

Jim adds, "Obviously with black baldies there's going to be better production. In our region, there's some premium for F1s. There's a good market for those females."

Jim says the improved temperament Hereford brings to their herd is important for safety on their operation. "Herefords are docile and not as high strung," he says.

Most recently, Jim and Karen participated in a major program for cross-fencing and pipeline access in their area through the National Resource Conservation Service Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP). "Our pastures are similar to the Sandhills of Nebraska," Karen says. "We had large pastures that were never utilized because of their distance from water."

Through EQIP, Doolittle Wagner Ranch developed wells and a pipeline along with cross-fencing and implemented rotational grazing. "This has improved water quality and grass utilization and, in turn, allows for better producing cattle" she says. "It will be interesting to see with those rotational options, the quality that can come out of

these crossbred calves. It was a major upgrade but well worth it. Plus," she laughs, "we won't have to ride as far to check or to move cattle with our rotational system."

Jim and Karen are working today to establish a legacy they can pass on to the next generation. Their three children, Charles, Samantha and Leslie, and their families still play roles in the operation. Charles recently helped AI during breeding season, and Samantha is making plans to eventually take the lead in overseeing the ranch.

"There are so many things happening in the industry in terms of research and improved genetics," Jim says. "We are right in the beginning stages of some unbelievable things happening, and young people will have the advantage of making those changes."

### Helping the industry

In 2017 Doolittle Wagner Ranch became one of two new young sire test herds for the American Hereford Association's (AHA) National Reference Sire Program (NRSP). "When we were approached about this program I was intrigued," Karen says. "We have a strong commercial herd with high quality cows. Participating in the NRSP is a way we can help the cattle industry."

In June, Jim and Karen bred 190 females to their selected Hereford bulls and are awaiting calving season for pastures full of black baldie calves. With a few minor tweaks to their already comprehensive recordkeeping system, they are prepared for collecting necessary data.

Jim says offering F1 females will provide them better prospects to market bred females than in the past. "The AHA offers ways for cattlemen like us to have more exposure through online marketing options, and we're definitely going to have better quality."

Jim says cattlemen can capitalize on the advantages of crossbreeding. "There are a lot of opportunities right now in the replacement female market as well as top performance feedlot cattle," he says. "We want to be a part of that." **HW**



Adding Hereford sires into an Angus-based herd added performance and growth into Jim Doolittle and Karen Wagner's herd.