

A Word from the Wise

**The Rafter Ranch is a
source of quality cattle
and timeless wisdom.**

by Kayla Jennings

A look to the left bears snow-capped peaks as far as the eye can see. A glance to the right, and a view of lush green grass dotted with red and white cows fills the frame. Following the winding Wise River through the Pioneer Mountains into the Big Hole yields encounters with wildlife and the locals who inhabit the small mountain community of Wise River, Mont. On the way out of town, nestled back in the mountains off the blacktop, sits a rich piece of the area's history — Rafter Ranch.

A look back

Don and Liz Jones, owners and operators of the ranch, have held the reigns for the last 51 years. However, the history spans far beyond the last half century. Don's grandpa, Walter Jones, homesteaded nearby in the late 1890s after heading west from his family's farming operation in Iowa.

He and his brother took a train to Missoula, Mont., then hopped on high-wheel bicycles to continue the excursion. However, the adventure of more than 100 miles came to a screeching halt in Wisdom, Mont., after a wheel was bent on a rocky trail. Because of an especially riveting card game, the town blacksmith was too busy to fix the tire.





This long-standing barn is part of the original homestead and is still in use today.

After Walter fixed his own tire, he and his brother decided Wisdom seemed like home. They ranched there for several years until Walter and his wife, Eva, moved back east in 1909. A Montana native, Eva quickly discovered that Iowa in the midst of summer was not ideal and told Walter, “I don’t know where you’re going, but I am going back to Montana!”

The couple’s fondness for the mountains brought them back to Montana in 1910, where they purchased five acres and a home in Wise River —

and acquired more land as the years progressed. In fact, the original barn Walter built still towers over the headquarters. If those beams could talk, they would share the stories of Don’s childhood gathering large bands of sheep from the mountains to bring home. His family was very active in the sheep business before introducing Hereford cattle into the operation in the early ’40s — a result of legislation at the time restricting use of the forest for sheep.

As time progressed, Don was drafted into the Army during the end of the war in Korea. After his deferment until September to finish making hay through the summer, he was stationed in Alaska.

“They had these Air Force and Army bases, and I was in them,” Don explains. “I got into an engineering outfit up there. We made trucks, caps, patrols and everything like that for heavy equipment.” In addition, he worked to overhaul generators through their electrical section and performed routine maintenance on anti-aircraft artillery gun sites.

While he enjoyed the opportunity to serve his country, Don could not get back to the ranch soon enough. He knew from an early age his true passion lay across the rugged, beautiful landscape of Wise River. Not long after coming back, he and

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Liz plays an active role in the daily decision-making and work on the ranch.



The Jones' retain bulls for their own use before selling the remainder private treaty.

his wife, Liz, took over the operation and changed the name to what it is today.

Don and Liz both have fond memories of those early years in the cattle business. "I can remember wrestling calves," Don notes. "Then somebody would come in to rope and drag him up to the fire, a couple of kids would hold him, then castrate him and brand him and earmark him."

It wasn't until the '50s that the family purchased their first cattle chute to aid in processing cattle. Don says it took a rebuild, or two, for the perfect chute because technology was not as advanced in those days — but a lot has changed since then.

Focused on success

With grandkids in the mix, this fifth-generation ranching operation has changed greatly since 1910. While Don and Liz still run a handful of Targhee, Columbia, South African Meat Merino (SAMM) and Dohne sheep, their primary focus is purebred horned Hereford and commercial cows.

Rafter Ranch boasts more than 350 commercial Hereford cows, 50 registered cows and 50 registered Hereford bulls. Don and Liz will sometimes cross with Shorthorn cattle to promote hybrid vigor in the commercial herd while maintaining the red color.

In addition to utilizing their flood-irrigated, privately owned property, they run cattle on a Bureau of Land Management (BLM) permit and two U.S. Forest Service Permits in the summer months. They trail cattle with a four-person crew and cow dogs to the BLM permit on June 1. After approximately a month there, they move the cattle to one of the two forest permits until September 30.

"We try to run a bull for every 15 head, or sometimes a little less, because they can go for 39 miles on this forest permit," Liz explains. "That is a lot of country to cover. They breed up well when they do that."

A two-month calving window is allotted from March to May for mature cows, and pregnancy tests

assure none are open. Open cows are culled, and there are seldom any late-calving females.

In contrast, their heifer calves are restricted to a 40-day calving window. Since heifers calve in the meadow near the homeplace, a 40-day window is more manageable in case there are calving difficulties. Once a calf hits the ground, Rafter Ranch assures it has the best start to a productive life.

"We paste the horns when we tag, give them a shot of multi-mineral and a 7-way," Liz notes. Additionally, they vaccinate for pink eye and test potential bull prospects for high-altitude pulmonary hypertension — better known as brisket disease.

Rafter Ranch turns a profit by exclusively selling steer calves at weaning or spayed yearling females. "We spay the heifers we have sorted off that we don't want," Liz notes. "Then the ones that are open in the fall after the vet tests them get spayed before going to a feeder."

Don adds, "We have a fellow buying them the last two to three years now. He sends them over to Washington — the feedlot over there. Every year they say, 'get those heifers over here!'"

Last year, Don and Liz sold their steer calves to someone from eastern Iowa who made it abundantly clear he wouldn't buy the steer calves if they didn't have the influence of Hereford genetics — not a problem for Rafter Ranch. Many customers appreciate the consistency in feeding and carcass quality found in Hereford-influenced cattle. "They are pretty consistent in the ribeye size," Liz notes. "As a whole for overall average, Herefords provide a product more suitable for the plate."

In addition to selling cattle through feedyards, Don and Liz market commercial calves through the Montana Hereford Association. For their registered stock, they sell groups of females from time to time and market bulls private treaty each year.

"We keep the bulls for five years then sell them," Liz says. "We use the ones that are five this March on the BLM for 20 to 25 days. Then when we bring them in to go to the forest, we cull those out and sell them."

Because of the rough terrain on the permits, an increased emphasis is placed on feet and leg structure as well as overall longevity and disposition. Don and Liz have been pleased with the outcome of utilizing exclusively Hereford bulls to achieve this. "A lot of people who have never used a Hereford bull use one, and they can't believe it," Liz notes.

Given the rugged environment, they aim to keep their bulls less than 2,000 lb. for ease in travel and covering cows. Cows are maintained at roughly 1,200 lb. "You have to think about what is efficient," Liz says. "The Herefords are bigger than some other breeds, but something I look at is the salvage value of that cow as well. These cows can bring a lot, and it is good to have that, too. I think a moderate cow that has a 600- to 650-lb. calf is about right. That is what we try to strive for anyway."

Their genetic foundation is built upon Line 1 Herefords and still maintains the same caliber of quality. Don remembers when they attended their first Cooper Hereford Ranch sale and bought their Line 1 herd bull for \$1,800. Today, they raise most of their own bulls, but they also still purchase bulls periodically. Their primary source is Churchill Cattle Co., but they also still purchase bulls from the annual Cooper and Holden Herefords production sale.

“I like Dale’s cattle,” Liz says of Churchill. “I think he does a great job with them, and he has got a good eye for cattle as well. Ultimately, he aims to have some bulls that work for the commercial cattleman.”

Selecting the future

When selecting bull prospects at sales, as well as making decisions to retain cattle in the herd, Liz says there are several things to think about from a commercial and seedstock perspective. As participants in the American Hereford Associations’ Whole Herd Total Performance Records (TPR™) program, Don and Liz see value in reflecting on records over the duration of the calves’ lives to make selection decisions.

“I think if you are going to do a good job and you want to raise your own bull, you should participate in the program to make sure you are not just doing what you want to do,” Liz advises. “It is pretty important to make sure all of those cows and bulls are in the whole herd program. Otherwise, you are kind of guessing and you don’t know for sure if you should keep certain cows or not.”

While all the data have value, Don and Liz place a heightened emphasis on lower birth weights, calving ease and milk. “We also put both yearling weights and weaning weights on the list since weaning weights are important because of selling calves as late as we calve,” Liz notes. “Yearling weights are important because we want to have heifers that are big enough to breed, and since the spay heifers go into the feedlots.”

In tandem with analyzing data, Rafter Ranch places emphasis on phenotype and reproductive performance. “I think you have to do both,” Liz says. “You have to use records, but you also have to use some eye appeal. When selecting a herd bull, for example, you will look at indexes, but you have to get what you like phenotypically also.”

For Don and Liz, depth of body, udder structure in females, style, and feet and leg structure are paramount. “It takes good feet and legs to make it in this country,” Liz quips.

She is not exaggerating. While Wise River is beautiful, harsh winters are just one of many forces threatening Don and Liz’s operation. Liz recalls several fires near their place over the years and says these fires are becoming worse because of the spruce budworm infestation.

Additionally, an increase in the predator population has been anything but positive for the



Rafter Ranch strives for moderately framed cows that can not only sustain a calf, but also have salvage value at sale time.

ranchers in the area. “It has been discouraging,” Liz notes. In addition to coyotes as a constant threat to young calves, the wolf population has also grown at an exponential rate. In fact, the ranch lost 10 calves last year to wolves alone.

Despite all the challenges, this is a lifestyle Don and Liz would not trade for the world. In their lifetime of involvement in the industry and travel across the world studying cattle, they have learned a thing or two along the way. They have passed this wisdom to attendees of Hereford tours at their ranch, to junior members with whom they interacted when their two daughters were in the National Junior Hereford Association and showing cattle, and to the many visitors they have hosted. They are excited to have their daughter, Yvonne, back on the ranch and hope to see it continue to grow for a lifetime more with the same principal goals in mind.

“You kind of aim to have the best cattle you can that are adequate and make you a living — just good cattle,” Don and Liz agree. “It’s a way of life.” **HW**



After five years, every bull is sold to ensure all bulls maintain the ability to cover cows in the rough climate.