

Focal and Functional

Based where “locally raised” is highly praised, Hereford breeders have locked in on niche markets.

by *Diane Meyer*

The first week of May has arrived, and with the prevailing temperate spring weather, a herd of 40 Hereford cows and calves trail out to a green, untrodden pasture of timothy and orchard grasses. From now until the start of deer season come mid-November, these moderate-framed, sound cows will flourish on the steep, rocky, 1,000-foot-high hillsides constituting the northwest corner of Connecticut.

New England Hereford Association President Jim Murdock latches the gate on those 40 good-natured females and heads down to his shop for another day’s work of restoring vintage antique boats. Meanwhile, his wife, Gail, and daughter, Katie Adkins, have set up shop at a farmers market in Harwinton, Conn., ready to sell individual cuts of the family’s Blue Moon Farm Hereford beef to the locals of Litchfield County.

Looking local

Much like most — if not all — breeders populating the Northeastern states, the Murdocks have found their niche serving local customers. Their target market is simple — “farm markets.”

“Out here, farm markets are the number one way to sell beef,” Jim Murdock says. “If you get into a market, especially a good one, you don’t give it up.”

With families tending to become smaller in size and seeking individual cuts, Murdock aims for an 800-pound carcass at slaughter to avoid an inventory of hard-selling, half- and whole-sized cuts. With that in mind, he adjusts his weaning seasons. Ideally, he prefers all cows be fall calvers so they can be bred and kicked out on grass in the spring. However, “We don’t wean all at once for a reason, and that’s because of the beef,” he explains. “Otherwise, we’d have everything ready all at once, and that can’t be.”

Steers need to be ready to slaughter year-round, which poses a major challenge because of limited numbers of processing plants in their part of the country. Luckily, Katie has helped alleviate the problem.

After she completed more than 11 years of strenuous legwork, permits and construction, her lifelong dream came to fruition when she opened Plymouth Meats in 2017, a full USDA-inspected slaughter and processing plant. “Her opening was a huge deal,” Murdock describes. “She was running two shifts inspected during the day and custom at night because people had limited places to go [with their cattle].”

With small-acreage farms and, therefore, small herd sizes, skyrocketing trucking expenses make it unrealistic



Three generations of the Murdock family sell Blue Moon Farm Hereford beef directly to customers at a local farmers markets. Pictured (l to r) are: Gail, Shirley and Katie.

to ship small groups to plants in the next state, much less to the Midwest. “A lot of places stopped their freezer beef business because there was not enough places to process them,” Murdock recalls. “When people from Connecticut are having to haul animals to New York, and Vermont and New Hampshire to try to get a scheduled opening to get an animal processed, it adds so much cost that it isn’t viable anymore.”

Shipping costs pose a problem not only for processing but also for participating in remote sales. As Murdock points out, there is no sense in driving all the way to the Midwest for one or two animals. The advent of internet sales has reduced extensive travel on behalf of the buyer, but dealing with transporting animals after the fact still puts a damper on the fire.

“Again, the big thing with [sales] is being able to get the animals out of the sale and to your farm,” Murdock says. “I think the easier and the more economical that is, the faster the internet sales will take off. Anyone who has internet sales needs to proclaim loud and clear if trucking is available.”

Focused market, focused efforts

Nestled in Sussex County in the northwestern region of New Jersey and operating with the motto “real Herefords that work and show,” Grass Pond Farm is home to 80 head of Herefords as well as the Billing family — Andy, his wife, Sheri, and their four children, Chase, Brooke, Hanna and Abby, and herdsman, AJ Stahoski, and his family. Here the cattle graze on mainly brome, orchard grass and clover. Sourcing local is equally important to consumers in Andy’s home state of New Jersey, which is the most densely populated in the nation and the fifth-ranking in per capita income.

“To capitalize on these positive attributes and compensate for the difficulty of selling bulls to the mostly small herds in the area, AJ’s wife, Ashley, is moving to launch a premium, by-the-cut, Grass Pond branded beef product directly to consumers in the local, affluent suburbs and through the numerous farmers markets,” Billing shares.

In conjunction with his commercial real estate development firm, Billing and his family began raising Herefords 13 years ago, after he had been absent from the Hereford industry for 14 years after dispersion of his father, Stu Billing’s, Overlook Farm. Early on, the Billings focused on raising show cattle but now breed for functionality and for cows that can perform on grass and hay only. Using an extensive embryo transfer (ET) program, Billing



The Grass Pond Farm operation is a family affair. Picture (l to r) are: Andy Billing, Hanna Billing, Dee Billing, Ashley Stahoski, Craig Stahoski, herdsman AJ Stahoski, Grant Weinmann, Abby Billing at the halter, fitter Justin Awckland, Sheri Billing and Chase Billing. Not pictured is Brooke Billing.

selects for good udders, milk flow, moderate size and carcass numbers. These “working” cows also “show” as part of Billing’s marketing plan. As with his real estate Billing is focused more on quality product and execution over quantity.

“We promote and market our program through showing, so we work to produce cattle that have show-quality phenotype on their way to becoming those cows that work,” he says. In fact, Billing and his family have exhibited at every Junior National Hereford Expo since 2008 and have been named the Premier Breeder and Premier Exhibitor at the New Jersey State Fair for seven consecutive years. Billing has set his sights on improving their competitiveness in the Northeast area and at the Keystone International Livestock Exposition National Hereford Show, a strategy he says goes hand-in-hand with pursuing profitability.

“We attend plus or minus 10 cattle shows a year ... to work on establishing a reputation as a top breeder,” Billing explains. “We’ve also sold quite a few animals through our website.”

After building a herd of 36 brood cows, give or take, Billing began to sell locally via private treaty. “As we’ve leveled out in terms of numbers and improved our quality, we added consignment sales to increase our exposure and number of cattle sold,” he says. Such sales include the Celebrate Maryland Sale and the spring sale put on by the New York Hereford and New York Angus breeders. He is also looking forward to participating in the inaugural Northeast Elite Hereford Sale put on by the New York, Pennsylvania, New Jersey and New England Hereford associations in September.

Even though Hereford breeders are small in number in New Jersey, Billing notes, “Hereford is the most popular beef breed in the state.” Still, small-sized herds makes selling bulls difficult, thus limiting overall demand and prices of purebred beef cattle.

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As a retired veterinarian, Tim Dennis notes the importance of docility in a herd and emphasizes that it is a marketable strength of the Hereford breed.

As a way to meet that challenge, Hereford breeder and retired veterinarian Tim Dennis reflects, “If we’re going to survive, we need a core nucleus of successful producers.”

Fitting the environment

Based in the Finger Lakes region of New York, Dennis and his wife, Dawn, own and operate Glade Haven Herefords in Penn Yan. Dennis aims to sell a few bulls every year, namely through consignment sales. For the last 10 years, he has consigned Hereford bulls through the Midland Bull Test in Columbus, Mont., as well as in the Pennsylvania Bull Test. His bull calves and bottom-end heifer calves have been sold as feeder calves to a neighbor for the last two decades. Purebred females are sold preferably as young cows with heifer calves at side through small consignment sales or directly to breeders typically located within 200 miles of the farm.

With nearly 60 years of raising Herefords under his belt, Dennis currently has a herd of 25 purebred mother cows and is all about reproductive efficiency, udder quality, disposition and basic performance. He uses artificial insemination (AI) and herd bulls in his breeding protocol, with his most recent bull purchase coming from Feddes Herefords in Manhattan, Mont.

Due to his round-the-clock career before retirement, Dennis explains his cows had to calve on their own. He timed calving for April and May to minimize stress and came by once or twice a day to tag and to check newborns, to treat navels, and to give an injection of vitamin E and selenium to counteract soil deficiencies.

“It worked out that my Hereford cattle had to pretty much take care of themselves,” Dennis observes. “I think one of the reasons they’re so efficient today is that over the years they were selected for those low maintenance traits.

“I’d rather focus on cattle that are really functional that will work in our environment,”

he adds. “Because our environment is unique to the rest of the country, it’s important that when we sell cattle the purchaser does well with them.”

Unique to his profession, Dennis offers follow-up veterinary visits on his sales. “I could make sure there was basic maintenance going on, both nutritional and health care, because the last thing I wanted to do was sell cattle and then have them crash,” he says. “Hereford cows are very efficient and low maintenance, but they still need basic management. And that basically is providing enough high-quality roughage and health care to enable them to perform as they are bred.”

As a veterinarian, Dennis has dealt with many problems that in turn have influenced how he selects for certain traits. “Catching cows, treating feet and trimming feet are not a lot of fun,” he says. “Those are things we shouldn’t have to do. I learned that early on as a veterinarian and adapted that into my selection process as well. I just don’t tolerate that in my herd.”

Sure-footed cattle, a nonnegotiable criterion the Hereford breed provides, are a staple in Northeastern herds due to the area’s rocky terrain. Pastureland is extremely limited — any land suitable to be hayed is hayed. Dennis describes how the steep hillsides and sandy, shallow soils make the terrain unsuitable for row crop or dairy farming. However, the abundance of natural grasses, like bluegrass, rye grass and naturally seeding white clover and birdsfoot trefoil, provides an ideal grazing environment, especially for a breed that has “been very popular in New England for decades because they thrive,” as Murdock puts it.

Dennis emphasizes, “We need to focus on what we’re good at and not try to copy other breeds. The first thing we’re good at is disposition. Like most in the Northeast and across the country, ours is a family operation, so we really need to focus on the disposition deal.” He notes the calm temperament of Herefords was important in raising his now adult children — daughter, Laura, and son, Michael — on the farm and getting them involved in 4-H and the New York Junior Hereford Association.

Despite notable and unique differences to other cattle operations across the country, Dennis, Billing and Murdock all agree they are afforded equally unique opportunities to supply a quality product to a target market.

“I think our biggest opportunity is the fact that we’re relatively close to the consuming public,” Dennis observes. “We have opportunities to show these folks they can eat local, they can know where their food comes from, and it’s something that fits into a small, family-sized situation.” **HW**