



Drew, Ray, David and Lawrence Duncan are willing and able to pursue a legacy of producing top-notch Hereford cattle.

Some Things Never Go Out of Style

Able Acres, Wingate, Ind., has been a leader in the Hereford industry for decades — all while maintaining a strong foundation of integrity.

by *Christy Couch Lee*

He can drive throughout the countryside and point out each farm to which he has delivered his Hereford genetics in his nearly 84 years on Earth. But one thing you will not find him doing? Bragging about any of his vast successes.

No, Lawrence Duncan, Wingate, Ind., is about as humble as they come. But take a look at the many national championship banners and photos tied to his Able Acres, and it is easy to see he has been a pioneer in the Hereford breed.

He has seen many changes through the years, and he and his family have continually been innovative in their approach — all while maintaining a focus on quality and integrity.

Yes, while some things change, some things definitely remain the same.

Deep roots

Born in 1935, Lawrence was raised on the family farm in Montgomery County, Ind., where

his parents raised registered Duroc hogs and draft horses.

“I have deep roots here and have only moved five miles in my entire life,” he says.

At 10 years old, Lawrence began showing Hereford heifers and steers in 4-H at the county and state fairs. After graduating from high school in 1954, he attended Purdue University, majoring in animal husbandry. During his senior year, he married Petzi — they honeymooned at the Fort Worth Stock Show.

Following graduation from Purdue, the newlyweds moved into his parents’ house and began farming.

“In 1958, we held a sale to buy a place to live,” he recalls. “The high seller went for \$1,200. Times change.”

Lawrence’s dad, Harvey, primarily organized and planned the first sale.

“There was a local radio station with a daily farm program, and the broadcaster came out to the

farm and interviewed us and ran a daily ad for the sale,” Lawrence recalls. “There were a lot of small farms back in our area then, nearly all of them with livestock, so there were more potential customers and the local community could support a sale.

“Times have certainly changed,” he reiterates. “From the first sales, the organization was the most difficult part — particularly being able to organize help and all of the cattle. What we learned was that it is necessary to improve the handling equipment and facilities to make it all work, and even after 46 sales, we are still learning and improving.”

Forty-six annual production sales later, the Duncans have since marketed 2,369 cows, heifers, bred heifers and bulls as well as 582 steers.

“We didn’t start with much — 120 acres of corn and beans,” Lawrence says. “I started with a few Herefords at my dad’s place, and it has evolved one calf at a time.”

Lawrence and Petzi moved to the current home farm of Able Acres in 1962 and planted roots for the next generations to grow. The name “Able Acres” was a fit for a couple of reasons.

“My dad always said, if you’re able to farm, you should pursue it,” Lawrence says. “But also, while we were waiting in line for stalls, it occurred to my dad, Harvey, that everything was done alphabetically. If our name started with an ‘A,’ it would be listed first. ‘Able Acres’ fit both of these items, so our prefix was ‘AA’ from then on.”

Today, Able Acres consists of 140 to 150 cows, along with 2,200 acres of row crops and hay. Not only has the farm expanded — so has the Duncan family. Through the years, Lawrence and Petzi welcomed five children: four sons, Lary, Gary, David and Andy, and one daughter, Caril. All five children own Hereford cattle and take pride in their involvement in the industry to this day.

“All exhibited as juniors at a national show, and all were 10-year 4-H members,” Lawrence says. “It

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would be difficult to walk away from something that is what you have known your whole life, since the oldest child was 14 for the first annual sale and the youngest was 3.

“It has kept our family connected,” he continues. “We know that we will all be together on the Saturday after Thanksgiving each year, and even if one can’t be here, which is rare, they are watching and tracking online. It isn’t unusual for one to drop what they are doing to come take a picture for an ad, or to travel 500 miles to prepare meals for the sale, even though they have other careers away from the farm.”

As well, Petzi operated a preschool for 25 years in the building where the meal and clerking are done.

“It took the whole family to get everything cleaned and put back in its place before school began just 36 hours after a sale ended,” daughter-in-law Jill says. “I don’t know how else to put it other than it is just what we do.”

As well, some members of the family have become involved in the Boer goat industry with son Lary serving as the CEO of the American Boer Goat Association.

And the Duncan family’s tradition in the livestock industry has carried through to the fourth generation of nine grandchildren — all of whom have been active with Herefords, hogs and Boer goats.

The Duncans have definitely given back to the industry which has treated them well. Lawrence and son Gary have each served terms as the Indiana

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Hereford Association president. David's wife, Jill, is the current association secretary/treasurer, and David is a director. In addition, grandchildren Ray and Hattie both serve on the Indiana Junior Hereford Association board of directors.

Lawrence and Petzi reached their 60th anniversary milestone before her passing in February 2018.

Strong genetics

Lawrence credits his longevity in the Hereford industry to two things: quality genetics and quality relationships.

D Mixer Domino 91, purchased from Dettke Farms, Marysville, Kan., in the 1970s, sired many Able Acres champions through the years.

“He sired great females, including AA Perf Mixerette 8 — the 1969 Champion Hereford Heifer at the Indiana, Illinois and Kentucky state fairs,” Lawrence says.

Many sons, daughters, grandsons and granddaughters by D Mixer Domino 91 were named champion at numerous county and state fairs through the years.

In addition, AA Blue Knight was a many-time champion and national class winner in the '80s. He went on to sire many successful progeny, including AA AGF Bo Diddy, the grand champion Hereford bull at the 1991 Indiana and Kentucky state fairs.

And their herd sire, AA PRF Wideload — 2004 North American International Livestock Expo Reserve Grand Champion Hereford Bull — was the first Able Acres sire to earn the American Hereford Association (AHA) Golden Bull award. To date, the Duncans have achieved this honor seven times.

Wideload has also sired numerous champions across the nation, including the 2007 national champion bull, Reload.

But above all of the awards, the Duncans say their friendships and relationships within the industry are their greatest accomplishments. Lawrence finds great reward in customers calling to purchase Able Acres genetics sight unseen.

“To know they trust me — they just ask me to choose something and deliver it — that means a lot,” he says.

Additionally, the return customers bring great satisfaction, David says. “We have customers who first began buying their 4-H calves from us, and now they're buying for their kids and grandkids,” he says. “It's really humbling to be raising these cattle for many years, and these people still come back.”

But it is not just the customers — it is the customers who become lifelong friends.

“These lifelong friends and the memories you make are pretty sacred things in life,” David says.

One such customer-turned-friend is Mark Sturdy, Rochester, Ill. He and his family run Sturdy Hereford Outlet, and he also is the practicing veterinarian with Rochester Veterinary Clinic.

Sturdy began attending Able Acres' production sales in the late '70s, when he made his first

purchase with his dad. On average, he has purchased one or two heifers each year from the Duncans and currently owns interest in several cows with the family. They have partnered on many bulls through the years, too.

As Sturdy describes, the Duncans do not only have a reputation for integrity in the industry, but they are also good people, period.

“They have treated me fairly and do an exceptional job running their cow herd,” Sturdy says. “But even more, they're honest and

have integrity. They're good partners and are good people to work with. Lawrence has made an impact on many herds, as well as many people. I can't think of anyone who's had a bad thing to say about him. And that's saying something.

“Simply put, they're a good American family that I'm proud to know,” he adds.

Innovation at work

The Duncans have continually involved new technologies through the years, including in vitro fertilization (IVF) and embryo transfer (ET).

Jack Ward, AHA executive vice president, says the Duncan family has been an innovator in the Hereford breed.

“Able Acres utilizes all tools available to provide reliable, honest and quality genetics that have been sold to buyers throughout the United States,” he says. “In the fall of 2018, Able Acres hosted its 46th annual production sale which featured the strongest and freshest genetics the Hereford breed has to offer. Lawrence and his family were early adopters in collecting performance data and have been dedicated supporters of the AHA's Whole Herd Total Performance Records [TPR™] program. In addition, Able Acres has been



performance testing bulls through the Indiana Bull Evaluation Program (IBEP) for many years.”

Lawrence says the IBEP has provided valuable data and has helped to continually improve their operation through the years.

“I served on the IBEP board of directors for many years,” he says. “We have remained supporters of this program for several reasons. It is a great way to market our bulls to not only Hereford breeders, but also to commercial breeders. It gives us the opportunity to reach some customers we would never cross paths with. Another advantage is the data that is collected at the IBEP. It provides information we need to be concerned about to improve not only our herd, but the breed and beef industry, as well.”

Jill says the success of the sales can be attributed to great neighbors lending a hand at sale time. “There is no way to have 46 sales without the people we have, who we can depend on,” she says.

In addition, she says Able Acres’ butcher-beef program has also enhanced the operation’s success. “We have several butcher beef customers and try to sell as much fed-out steers as possible, so that we can optimize the price we receive for our fed cattle,” she says.

Lawrence says spending a lifetime in the Hereford industry has allowed him to witness many changes.

“We’ve gone through the shortest calf winning the show to the tallest,” he says. “I remember the first calf we had to reach 1,000 pounds at one year — that was an accomplishment then. But it wouldn’t stand any competition now. We thought we really had done something with that one, at that time.”

However, one constant at Able Acres is disposition.

“Disposition is important,” Lawrence says. “All females are broke to tie. If they don’t pass that test, they’re gone.”

David says the reasoning is simple: “If you sell a wild one to someone, they won’t come back.”

Herefords in the future

Lawrence believes the future of the Hereford breed, as a whole, is dependent on the breed remaining relevant.

“And, we need to continue to earn the commercial breeder’s respect,” he says.

Jill agrees. “We must stay relevant in the feedlots’ eyes, as well as the cow-calf operations’ eyes,” she says. “Additionally, with the land-use changes here in the eastern part of the country, there isn’t as much pasture. So we must continue to find new customers.”

As for advice for someone just beginning in the Hereford industry? Lawrence has one word: patience.



For Lawrence, the opportunities to improve each calf crop and the promise of the future have kept him in the business for decades.

“It takes a long time to build a customer base,” he says. “One person tells another, and that’s our best advertisement.”

Additionally, Lawrence says, you must treat others with respect.

“You have to treat others the way you want to be treated,” he says.

David agrees. “He’s right,” he says. “Everyone will talk, and a bad one causes more trouble than a good one causes good.”

These principles have set Able Acres on the path for success into the next generation and beyond. Lawrence says the promise of the future has kept him involved in the industry.

“There’s something about looking forward to the next year’s calf crop, hoping it will be better than the one you’ve just had,” he says.

And, he notes, he is optimistic about the future of Able Acres. He believes the fourth generation of Duncans hold great promise.

“I have several grandchildren — from ages 29 to 11 — who could come back after college and manage the operation,” he says.

As for Lawrence? He hopes to be remembered for building a foundation for the future.

David’s 15-year-old son, Ray, says his grandpa is succeeding.

“He’s definitely done a great job of building that foundation,” Ray says. “He’s taught me that it’s all about how you treat people, and you only get back what you give.”

Andy’s 15-year-old son, Drew, agrees. Grandpa Lawrence is instilling values that will last a lifetime.

“He has taught me that you’re always burning daylight,” Drew says. “He’s also taught me not to give up, and to work hard.”

Yes, Lawrence Duncan has seen many changes, and he’s bound to see more in the years to come. But a few things that will never change? Integrity. Honesty. Innovation.

Some things will change. But some things will always remain the same. **HW**