



The View from the Block

Hereford industry auctioneers have witnessed and participated in great breed advancement through the decades.

by *Christy Couch Lee*

They have a view that many do not. The faces of buyers, anticipating the lots they have circled in their catalogs. Ringmen with phones in hand minutes before go time, gathering those last-minute presale bids and ready to highlight the bids of the day. Breeders who have worked all year to bring together an offering to sustain their operation another year, while benefitting other cattlemen, too.

And the auctioneer climbs up onto the auction block and brings them all together with a

confident chant, the tap of a gavel and the final word — “sold!” — transferring ownership and keeping the industry moving forward.

The auctioneers of the Hereford industry have seen many changes through the decades, and they have played an integral role in the advancement of the breed. Take a few minutes to chat with them, and they are sure to tell you “as much as things change, some things stay the same.”



Eddie Sims

Elgin, Okla.

Began as auctioneer and sale manager in 1968. Retired after 50 years in 2018.

Q How do you envision the future of the breed?

A If it isn't broke, don't fix it. The Hereford breed is in a good position, with new people getting into the business. Our breeding cattle are good and efficient, and the black baldy is the best F1 that exists today.

We can still work on udders and longevity in mother cows, and producing enough bulls for the market. But I would like to see us all working to help breeders promote and sell their cattle, rather than continually adding data. A friend was recently joking that we would probably need to print two or three catalogs just to get all of the data printed for a sale. We have confused our customers with all of this data. I like the KIS method — Keep It Simple.

Q What is your favorite part of being an auctioneer? (What gets you out of bed in the morning, so to speak.)

A The greatest thing about this business? Every sale day is a different day. Different people. Different cattle. Different market. You can't predict what will happen today, based on yesterday's sale. Whether you're in North Dakota or Texas, you get to work with what's there.

The mistake a lot of young auctioneers make is to think they know what will happen before a sale begins. The people in the seats will tell you. You just have to be smart enough to watch them tell you what they want to buy, and the auctioneer has to be good enough to have control of it.

Q What is one of your favorite memories as an auctioneer?

A I have lots of great memories, but a few stand out. Selling Randy Owens' sales for 35-plus years. Selling Franklin Delano Roosevelt Junior's sale, and sitting in the former U.S. President's desk chair. Working with Star Lake Cattle Ranch and Montie Soules from their first sale through their dispersal — they're great people and were a great asset to the business.

Selling Express Ranches' first Hereford sale. They are the largest purebred operation in the world, and now they're in the Hereford business. That should put a star in our crown.

And also, having my wife Ruth by my side. In 1979, I had sales 30 of 31 days in October, and I was on an airplane every night. Several years,

I had 150 sales a year. She was home raising the kids and caring for the cattle. If it hadn't been for my sweet wife, we wouldn't have survived.

Jim Birdwell

Fletcher, Okla.

Grew up in Hereford business.

Began as an auctioneer in 1978.



Q Describe how the nature of Hereford sales has progressed from when you first started as an auctioneer.

A The pace of the auction has picked up quite a bit through the years. Sales used to be slow and [it] took several hours to sell a few lots of cattle. Many speeches were made. That has changed over the years, and now it's more of a rapid pace, which everyone likes better. You can sell a lot more cattle in one day's time.

Sales used to be more of a social event than they are today, too. Lots of people would come in the day before, and they'd socialize and attend the sale party the night before. Some operations still do this. But most are now more of a one-day event. Buyers arrive that morning and look at the cattle. And then the auction begins.

Q How do you envision the future of the breed?

A I see some real changes that will need to be made in the beef industry, as a whole. The industry will need to understand what the consumer wants, and in turn, the commercial industry will need to produce the beef that the consumer wants to buy.

As purebred breeders, we will need to produce cattle to fit those needs. If we want growth in the Hereford industry, we must produce genetics that work for those commercial programs.

Q What is one of your favorite memories as an auctioneer?

A I can remember my first sale that I sold by myself. At the time, I was working for National Cattle Services. Eddie Sims got snowed in and couldn't get out of Nebraska, and he had a sale in Missouri. At the last minute, he called and said I was going to have to do it, because he couldn't get there.

I told the owner, "Eddie won't be here, and I'm going to have to sell your sale."

He said, "I'm paying for a high-priced auctioneer."

My response? "Yes, sir. But I'm all you've got."

The sale averaged \$650, which was a good sale in the late '70s. So, it worked out fine.

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Dale Stith

Mays Lick, Ky.

Raised in Hereford industry. Began as a Hereford auctioneer in 1975.

Q Describe how the nature of Hereford sales has progressed from when you first started as an auctioneer.

A In the past, cattle were selected based on appearance and pedigree. Now, breeders have moved to selecting strongly based on EPDs [expected progeny differences], beyond quality and function. Breeders need to select based on a balance of all traits — quality, function and EPDs.

Q What is your favorite part of being an auctioneer? (What gets you out of bed in the morning, so to speak.)

A The adrenaline it creates in me. I love working together with a sale team to achieve the best possible results for the seller. I have often said that a sale is a natural high for me. I've never used drugs, but if people on drugs are higher than I am on that auction block, then it must be some pretty good stuff.

Sometimes a seller expects the sale team to make chicken salad out of chicken crap. And occasionally, we can do it.

Q What is one of your favorite memories as an auctioneer?

A In 1979, I was helping to manage a sale for Whip-O-Will Farm in North Carolina. My mentor and retired auctioneer, A.W. "Ham" Hamilton, knew he couldn't sell the entire sale. He told me I could sell the last two. I knew it was attitude time, so I sat down and sold the last two.

There was a Canadian in the crowd who liked the way I handled that situation, and he employed me 40 years ago. I have been working all across Canada for multiple breeders for 40 years since. Canada has been a huge part of my livelihood, and I cherish the friends I have made there and the opportunities they have all given me.

Attitude in life is 90 percent.



Tommy Barnes

Lowndesboro, Ala.

Has worked Hereford sales since 1973. Began auction business in 1982.

Q Describe how the nature of Hereford sales has progressed from when you first started as an auctioneer.

A It's phenomenal how much the performance records and the knowledge of these cattle has changed. We've gone from men telling you they've had nothing but a good one to now having records to prove it.

Q What is your favorite part of being an auctioneer? (What gets you out of bed in the morning, so to speak.)

A It's exciting. Every time that gate comes open, it's a brand-new challenge. I love going to a sale and not hardly knowing anyone there. If I know 80 percent of the crowd, I know where we are going. But when I have new faces, the challenge is greater, and I love it.

Q What makes the Hereford breed and its breeders unique?

A There are good beef cattle in every breed out there, and you can find a use for every one of them. But the people producing Hereford cattle truly make this industry stand apart. We have some really great Hereford breeders who have stood the test of time and have been in the business for years — their families go way back. Our people have the reputation for being dedicated and doing a great job producing great cattle. That's what makes the Hereford breed stand out. Our breeders will propel Hereford cattle into the future.

Joe Goggins

Billings, Mont.

Began auctioneering with his dad, a respected purebred auctioneer, in 1982. Now owns three livestock auction markets and a video marketing business.



Q How do you envision the future of the breed?

A I think the future of the Hereford breed is bright. There is a strong demand for those Hereford commercial females in the commercial sector — and that's how a breed survives.

With the national cow herd turning black, there's so much room for the Hereford bull, too. It's such a great cross on a black cow.

Q What is your favorite part of being an auctioneer? (What gets you out of bed in the morning, so to speak.)

A I like to compete, and I like people. Being in the auction business gives me the best of both worlds. Ranch people are my kind of people. And when you think of the great stud horses and racehorses and cattle — competition creates demand. And there's no better way to create demand than through the auction.

Q What makes the Hereford breed and its breeders unique?

A You can cross a Hereford on a black cow, regardless of breed, and add disposition and hardiness. Many breeders want these two traits, and they're extremely important to the industry. For those with crossbreeding programs, heterosis and performance are key. And that's where you gain when you put a Hereford bull on a cow herd.

Hereford cattle work on the range but also on the feedlot. They can handle some cold weather and handle adversity. That's probably why the breed is hanging on and is as strong as it is today.

C.D. "Butch" Booker

Colfax, Wash.

Raised in family auction business. Two-time International Auctioneer Champion.



Q What is one of your favorite memories as an auctioneer?

A Definitely the day we sold C Miles McKee 2103 ET for Colyer Herefords and Angus, setting a world record at \$600,000. The name behind the bull has real history for Kansas State University alumni, and it was incredible to see a family who has worked so hard have that accomplishment.

Q What makes the Hereford breed and its breeders unique?

A The Hereford breed is unique in its ability to adapt to so many different environments. There's an old saying that many ranches in the west were paid for by Hereford cattle, and that's definitely a true statement. I have seen these cattle be able to perform just as well in arid environments as they can in lush, irrigated grass. The ability of these cattle to adapt is unique.

From a people standpoint, Hereford breeders are survivors. There have been some challenges with the breed through the years, but these people have persevered and have a love for these cattle. They knew they needed to make some changes with these cattle, and they've done it. They're good salt-of-the-earth people, and you know what you're getting when you deal with a Hereford breeder. What they tell you is spot on from a business standpoint. You know what you're going to get.



Eddie Burks

Park City, Ky.

Raised in Hereford industry. Graduated from Missouri Auction School in 1991.

Q Describe how the nature of Hereford sales has progressed from when you first started as an auctioneer.

A During my career, the use of online bidding and the role of the internet and cell phones has truly changed the auction. When I started, you gave a bid to someone on the sale staff, letting him know what you were willing to pay. That was your only option. Now, you can have anyone on a cell phone in a split second.

Q How do you envision the future of the breed?

A The breed is very strong. We have survived the fad of the exotics, and we still are one of the largest registries in the country. That's a testament to the Hereford cow or Hereford-crossbred cow having a place in the industry. The Hereford cow has a bright future, and the breed is diverse enough to stand competition from coast to coast. We also have had good leadership that has positioned us to be a major part of the beef industry.

Q What is one of your favorite memories as an auctioneer?

A It's hard to beat having the opportunity to sell the "Mile High Night" National Hereford Sale twice. That crowd, that enthusiasm, climbing up onto that block and looking out at all those people — that will be one of my greatest memories in my auction career. It's quite exhilarating and truly an honor to be asked to do it, first off. Then look at its success. The stage is set, and it's pretty inspiring. **HW**