



# Just Willard

Willard Wolf, Spokane, Wash., leaves a legacy of loyalty for cattle producers everywhere.

by Kayla Jennings

All a man really needs is a horse to catch when you need him, a dog that'll come to a call, a good friend who owns an arena and a trailer that's legal to haul; a woman who'll share in frustrations when the cow market's falling apart, a pair of good spurs, a saddle that fits and a pick-up that starts. Everything else is window dressing. Adapting from the lyrical virtuoso Cody Johnson, a cowboy does not require much to lead a life with a full heart.

However, some do have the good fortune of experiences beyond the simple joys life has to offer. From the red dirt of Oklahoma to the marble steps in Washington, D.C., and the rocky terrain of the Northwest United States, Willard Wolf, Spokane, Wash., was undoubtedly one of those men.

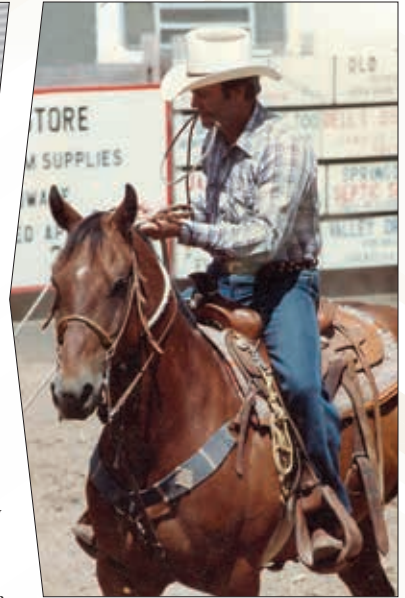
No introduction was needed for a cowboy like Willard among the cattle community. Like

superstars in other arts, no last name was looked for to know who he was. Fellow "Okie" and longtime friend Butch Booker affectionately notes Willard was as renowned in his sphere of influence as Pink, Cher and Madonna are in pop culture. This distinction does not come without merit.

"He was knowledgeable, he was confident and he was fun," Booker reflects. "He just tied it all together. He had the ability to connect with the rancher across the hood of a pickup and then go into the grocery store and connect with the meat cutter on the table."

## The journey

Willard made his mark on the Hereford industry, no doubt. With an induction into the National Livestock Marketeers Hall of Fame and an American Hereford Association (AHA) Hall of



All his life, Willard had a keen sense of organization while providing encouragement and support to producers as they overcame political challenges, or otherwise, to get the job done.

Merit award to show for his dedication, no one can argue his commitment to Hereford breeders everywhere. He gained immense respect from cattlemen across all breeds and across all segments of the industry.

The Oklahoma native's affinity for the cattle industry was sparked during his childhood riding the range with other young cowboys on his family's 300-head commercial Hereford cattle ranch adjacent to the Wichita Wildlife Refuge. His parents, Kenneth and Helen Wolf, sent him and his brother, Gordon, to Elgin High School, where Willard graduated as an honor student. Experience on his family operation, in tandem with his involvement in FFA, set him on a trajectory to study animal science and business law at Oklahoma State University (OSU).

In Stillwater, Okla., this Poke could be found leading the charge in many livestock teams and clubs or buying and selling feeder cattle at the Oklahoma City Stockyards. After graduation, he took a post with the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) as a livestock market news reporter working in Oklahoma City, San Francisco and Spokane, before being transferred to Washington, D.C. in 1965. His time in D.C. led him to a position with the Foreign Agriculture

Service, where he exported thousands of head of cattle, sheep, hogs and horses to many foreign countries. Those transactions included more than 5,000 head of Hereford cattle to Spain, Mexico, Portugal and Honduras.

These appointments poised him for the ride of his life — a 33-year assignment as the Northwest Field Representative for the AHA. Willard made fast friends in the region while he served as a consultant, marketer, researcher and promoter of the Hereford breed. During his tenure, his influence spanned to junior members and beyond his territory to all over the United States and into Canada, Mexico and Australia. Over the course of his career he bought more than \$12 million worth of Hereford bulls and females for ranchers.

"He had the background before he ever went to work for the Hereford association, which proved to be very, very beneficial for him as a fieldman," explains Dwayne Dietz, past AHA fieldman. "I would say Willard Wolf was probably the most well-rounded fieldman I've ever known because of the connections he had and the relationships he developed over the years."

Some of his more notable escapades are among the most unique cattle sales in history, such as the "Ladies in the Lobby" at the Historic Davenport hotel in Spokane, and "Ladies on the Boardwalk" on the floating dock at Coeur d'Alene Resort in Idaho. In fact, he even instigated the first ever registered cattle sale by satellite held at the Ag Trade Center in Spokane.

Gary Kendall, retired sale manager and lifelong friend, had the good fortune of helping

*continued on page 82...*



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**— Dwayne Dietz**



The floating stage was not reserved for musical sensations at the Ladies on the Boardwalk sale. Under Willard's guidance, Hereford cattle took center stage to create competition for Hereford genetics.

Not many limo driver's would allow a four-legged passenger on board. Likewise, not many ranchers would want their calf in a limo, but Willard somehow brought it all together for quite an entrance to the Ladies in the Lobby sale.

Willard pull off the Ladies in the Lobby sale. The two met while organizing the sale, and Kendall was immediately drawn to Willard's ability to work with people in putting on such extravagant events.

"People listened to him, and he knew how to talk to people about getting the Hereford breed established in their programs and sales," Kendall recalls. "He would learn from people, but they also learned from him. He knew how to express himself and consequently people listened."

They even listened when Willard pitched the idea to load up cattle into a limousine to kick off the Ladies in the Lobby sale. A red-carpet entrance was certainly memorable, but one of Sherry Colyer's favorite stories of the event and of Willard took place during the sale's planning phase. As the longtime Bruneau, Idaho, resident tells it, the days leading up to sale day meant an influx of advertisements being hung around town. Unbeknownst to the sale organizers, its title was met with some raised eyebrows from those outside the cattle industry — such as a priest of the neighboring church.

"The priest of the church approached the hotel and said, 'What is this Ladies of the Lobby sale right next to our church? We just can't have that,'" Sherry shares with a giggle.

Needless to say, there was a big misunderstanding on what exactly the sale was promoting. A frantic hotel clerk got Willard there right away to help mend the situation. In proper Willard fashion, he explained the sale to the priest and even got him to attend — a big change from wanting to shut down the sale just moments before.

Willard always knew the importance of using showmanship to put together sales customers

wanted to attend. Over the years, he worked hard to make it easy for customers to buy into Hereford genetics. One of these efforts was coordinating a string of production sales across the Northwest over the course of 10 days. Because the sales were so close in proximity and dates, buyers could conveniently attend the group of sales to fill all their orders.

Additionally, Colyer recalls a bus tour Willard spearheaded to bring excitement back to the Hereford breed. "The camaraderie developed through those kinds of functions is priceless because you get to meet people and learn about their operations," she describes. "He did some different innovative things to create business and to create some enthusiasm."

— Sherry Colyer

As one of these innovative efforts, Dietz dubs the Ladies on the Boardwalk sale a "history-making event." "To pull something like that off was phenomenal," he commends.

Willard's knack for marketing cattle stemmed from years of learning all he could each day. He is consistently noted for his immense knowledge of the industry from all perspectives and the skill to translate that to his career. "He was a cattleman at heart," Booker shares. "He was willing to embrace new ideas and willing to take the extra step to keep the producers he worked with in the forefront of the industry."

Colyer adds, "He understood the industry from the purebred side, the commercial sector, and right through harvest. He was able to put all those pieces together and knew what it took to get the end product. He knew that if the commercial ranchers weren't successful, the purebred breeders weren't going to be successful."

**“He did some different innovative things to create business and to create some enthusiasm.”**

His knowledge was only one small piece of the puzzle making him great. Willard's genuine desire to serve breeders as they pushed toward their operational goals was another component. Craig Huffhines, former AHA executive vice president, describes Willard as a man with a huge servant's heart and the ability to tie it to the cattle industry for producers everywhere to benefit.

"He was a man of integrity. He was a man of work ethic. He loved the ranching business," Huffhines says. "He loved his commercial clientele, even though he worked for a purebred operation, his heart was with commercial cowmen."

Huffhines highlights it was this affection for the commercial industry that made Willard so effective in helping develop the Certified Hereford Beef® program. He was especially skilled at not only creating marketing relationships with cattle feeders for this purpose but also fostering a more personal relationship with every operation he encountered.

This aptitude allowed Willard to work exceptionally well as a middleman between commercial cattlemen and seedstock producers. Because of his expertise and trustworthiness, he could encourage seedstock guys to produce what the commercial cattlemen needed. On the flipside, he was able to share data with commercial producers to show them how Hereford cattle fit their operational goals on the carcass side. Huffhines recalls from 1995 to 2008, Willard was a driving force in procuring a large chunk of the several million cattle in the *Certified Hereford Beef* program.

It goes without saying Willard was a major player in creating a marketplace where people competed for Hereford genetics, and his actions added enormous value to the cattle. "It put a premium on Hereford cattle," Huffhines notes. "It drove demand for Hereford bulls, so it really helped create an economic engine, particularly out west where these big ranches are, for Hereford bulls. He was very instrumental in the success of the Hereford breed."

His influence spanned beyond these contributions alone. In fact, he was heavily involved in leading the development of the Western Nugget Show and Sale, Reno, Nev. He provided so much guidance that the show awards one outstanding junior Hereford breeder the "Willard Wolf Award" each year.

In addition, Willard's resume boasts his being a former president of the Spokane County Cattlemen, a committee member with the Washington Cattlemen's Association, a member of the Cattle Producers of Washington and a



According to his co-workers and peers, Willard had the credibility to communicate breed improvement ideas to further programs like Certified Hereford Beef because he had his "fingers on the pulse" of the industry, as Craig Huffhines describes.

board member of the Spokane Junior Livestock Show. His hard work and talent were recognized with inductions into the AHA Hall of Merit in 2005 and the National Livestock Marketeers Hall of Fame in 2007.

While Willard put in for retirement in 2001, he never really left the cattle industry. Up until earlier this year, he was still filling orders for the *Certified Hereford Beef* program and Crossroads Cattle Co. With heavy hearts, Willard's family and friends said goodbye for the final time on March 13, 2019. After a valiant battle with cancer, Willard passed away at age 78, leaving behind his wife Patty, son Bart, and daughters Wende and Wendy.

### The reminiscing

Willard was a jack-of-all-trades and a master of many — an optimist, a marketer, a loving husband, a loyal friend and a master communicator to those in every aspect of the cattle business from ranchers to grocery store shoppers. When he was not attending a cattle sale, he could be found calf roping, playing golf or cheering on his beloved Gonzaga Bulldogs and OSU Cowboys to victory. To his friends' chagrin, he enjoyed exchanging text messages or calls about a big game where their alma maters would face off.

A Kansas State Wildcat, Dietz, relished texting Willard back and forth during the football and basketball seasons. "We'd get on a ballgame, and it would be like seeing each other back in time during the game," Dietz remembers. "He might

*continued on page 84...*



Willard's knack for water witching was well-known across the Northwest. If there was water, he was always sure to find it with two willow tree branches in hand.



text me, 'Lousy call. That wasn't a foul.' Those were always against Gonzaga, of course."

Booker says another thing Willard is known for is being a water witcher. With two willow-tree branches in his hands, he found water on many places — including Booker's. While Booker had a run of bad luck trying to witch the well himself, he admits Willard simply had the natural ability.

Willard experienced this natural ability, or luck, in his career, as well. Booker recalls one such day when Willard managed to unexpectedly sell a load of heifers to a stranger. They were out to visit with a man who had a fairly common name, and Willard misplaced the phone number. After calling information, they were able to reach who they thought was the guy they were hoping to visit.

Willard introduced himself over the phone and soon discovered he had called the wrong number. Even so, when the man heard Willard was selling heifers, this guy told him, 'Hey, I am looking for some heifers, too!' Sure enough, Willard ended up getting this complete stranger set up with the cattle

he needed. "He was good, but he also had some luck," Booker adds with a grin.

There is no shortage of stories to share from Willard's time on the road. However, one thing many of the stories have in common is the lasting influence those times made in people's lives. "He's a dear friend, confidant and ever encouraging of people in business," Huffhines shares. "When you're in the business world, people gravitate to that kind of a person. As a young man, that's the kind of influence he had on me.

"He was really instrumental in my early career in putting a fledgling startup beef company together," Huffhines continues. "He was on the ground floor of that process and really understood the supply chain part of it, and we spent a lot of time together. What I learned from Willard was how to talk to a cow-calf man because he treated them all with respect. I mean, he treated them like family."

Colyer adds, "It didn't matter if breeders had five head or 500 head, he went and visited them and learned about their cattle, learned about their operation and then, ultimately, earned their trust."

Kendall shares a similar story of benefitting from Willard's trustworthiness and encouragement. As the years of their friendship progressed, Willard saw promise in Kendall's ability to organize sales. After much encouragement, Kendall finally gave in to Willard's ideas of him becoming a sale manager.

"He finally told me, 'You know, you can do it, and I am going to show you how to do some of this stuff. I will show you how to prep these sale catalogs and get this stuff together,'" Kendall reflects. "I got started and one of the very first sales I did was the Nugget sale in Reno, and he was instrumental in getting me in there. He had confidence in me, and he is just one of those guys that can see what people are after and then get the most out of them."

Kendall and Willard's friendship extended well beyond the sale barn. On many a weekend, the dynamic duo could be found at the lake or on the golf course. But perhaps one of Kendall's fondest Willard memories occurred just days before his friend's passing. When Willard fell ill, Kendall called almost every day and made sure to tell Willard how much he cared for him — and Willard expressed his sentiment just the same. While sad, the exchange is perhaps one of Kendall's most memorable moments in their friendship.

"We appreciated each other's knowledge and friendship until the end," Kendall says.

### The legacy

While Willard's life on Earth has come to a close, his friends are sure his legacy will live on beyond their years. Labeled one of the "great" breed field



When he was not on the road, Willard always made a point to spend valuable time with his family. Pictured (l to r) are: Claire Wilber, Wende Wilber, Wendy Porter, Ian Wilber, Patty Wolf, Willard Wolf and Lance Wilber.

representatives in his biography for the Hereford Hall of Merit award, he will not soon be forgotten among those close to the cattle industry.

“He was the ultimate fieldman,” Colyer reflects. “There are different people that were competitors and very good field men in their own right, but I would say they tipped their hats to Willard. He was an ultimate professional, not just because of the purebred side, but he got it. He understood what the industry was, and it wasn’t just the purebred breeders. He involved the commercial men and on through to help with the *Certified Hereford Beef* program for the end product.”

Likewise, his coworkers note his impressive ability to combine a humble servant’s heart with confidence, knowledge and an unmatched tenacity for the business.

“The legacy of Willard Wolf will not be forgotten,” Dietz says. “Some people may be popular, but in a couple of years they are forgotten. That will not happen with Willard. He made his mark on the people and the industry in the Northwest. Working for an association, you are always subject to criticism, but there were fewer

half full appear mostly full. His positive attitude and resiliency truly made a difference in the lives of those around him.

“Loyalty to the business and to the people he serves is his legacy,” Huffhines says. “He was a constant professional, and he changed the industry for Hereford when it was really difficult times. He was a catalyst of change that brought back a resurgence of the Hereford breed.”

The Hereford industry is fortunate to have had Willard on its team. Noted as one-in-a-million, men of his caliber and class do not come along often. From his personal life to his professional career, he maintained an attitude anyone would be proud to have in a friend or breed representative.

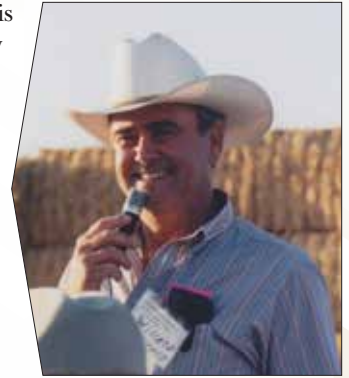
“What was it about Willard Wolf that made him so great? It is that people trusted him. They trusted him full bank,” Booker says. “He did so much for people. He’d buy their bulls, select their replacements, bought their calves and he would even go help work the cattle if he had time.”

From where Kendall stands, people trusted Willard because he always gave the best advice and truly cared about the people he helped — and cherished the opportunity to do.

“He sure enough knew how to get you going down the road in the right direction,” Kendall recalls. “I think people appreciated his help, and he liked that. He liked being the guy people depended on. He never got tired of people depending on him. In fact, I think he took that as a badge of honor.”

All his friends agree this type of legacy could not have been built without one other person — his wife, Patty. “Willard and Patty became a team,” Booker says. “That is one thing that really attracted people to Willard and kept Willard being able to go as much as he did. She was a big part of his success.”

Colyer says it would take a book to note all his successes and stories over the years. As the Cody Johnson song goes, it is safe to say nobody knew what they were getting into when they got tangled with a cowboy like Willard, but they can all agree this cowboy left big boots to fill in this world and will be remembered for generations to come. **HW**



“What was it about Willard Wolf that made him so great? It is that people trusted him. They trusted him full bank.”

— Butch Booker

criticisms made about him than anyone else in the business. He came as close as anyone I know to pleasing everyone. He was top of the line without a doubt.”

As one of his very best friends and the best man in his wedding, Dietz says Willard crosses his mind every day and this sale season without Willard will not be the same. He has and will continue to be honored in sale catalogs and even by a reserved seat at one sale. “Believe me, there will not be a sale in the Northwest he won’t be mentioned at this year,” he notes.

This degree of applause from his peers undoubtedly came from the loyalty he demonstrated over many years. No matter the situation, Booker says Willard could make a glass less than



Behind every successful man is a supportive woman encouraging him every step of the way. Willard and Patty were no different, as she spent many hours alongside him on the job.