



Passing the Test of Time

Larson Hereford Farm proves time is no match for the Larson family's dedication to their farm and the Hereford breed.

by Brooke Roberts

This story began more than 145 years ago, when a young man with an entrepreneurial spirit sailed across the Atlantic Ocean from Norway, recruited for the skills his Scandinavian heritage offered to large U.S. lumber companies. In 1876, Esten Larson purchased a farm in the rolling, rocky hills of northwest Wisconsin. To this day his logging equipment, genetics from his son's original purchase of Hereford cattle and, most importantly, his family members still reside at the Larson Hereford Farm in Spring Valley, Wis.

Today, Fred Larson, his wife, Lori, and sons, Justin (35) and Easten (33), share the story of the growth and development of their family's operation right alongside the Hereford breed itself.

"The story goes that my grandpa had taken the family out on a trip out West, and they stopped at a café to eat," says Fred Larson, the 58-year-old great-grandson of Esten Larson. "At this café, my grandfather found out there was going to be this sale. It had been a bad, dry year and some ranch was selling out, and they went to the sale and ended up





buying a train car full of cows and they shipped them back here. So that was the original purchase of registered Hereford females.”

The early chapters

Larson's first memories in the showing began in 1970 when he exhibited his first 4-H steer, a Hereford calf weighing in at 973 pounds. The steer beat more than 100 other calves to take home grand champion honors at the Northwest District Livestock Show. The Larsons went on to win the show three of the next four years with 1,000-pound Hereford steers they had bred.

But then the tide turned.

“All of a sudden, the extreme things started showing up,” Larson explains. “The term ‘exotic’ sounds really dated, but the exotic breeds are what came in and took hold.”

One-thousand-pound Hereford steers were no longer purple-ribbon cattle. Larson says that era proved difficult for Hereford breeders looking to market bulls, and the cattleman's brows furrow when he thinks of how the breed was perceived at the time.

“People would look down their noses at Herefords — old-fashioned, out-of-date — and ask what you would want Herefords for,” he says. “That always annoyed me, and I know it bothered a lot of other people, too.”

Larson credits his father for guiding his family and their herd through the tough times. “His experience, work ethic and faith taught me how to deal with diversity,” Larson explains. Those who have been grounded in the cattle business for as long as the Larson family learn that trends never stay the same for long.

The pendulum swings

The perception and phenotypic traits of Hereford cattle have varied immensely in the last century, and the Larsons' herd is a prime example.

“We went through that kind of moderate-to-small range, and then they were super big and



“Every cattle breeder out there is just trying to make their cattle better,” Larson says. “I think the industry has done a great job.” That effort to make better cattle has resulted in drastic phenotypic changes in the Larson's herd sires throughout the years. Past sire Gold Crown (l) and current herd sire UPS Hutton 4249 ET.

you couldn't make them tall enough,” Larson says. “That was the race, you had to just keep going bigger and bigger and bigger. I bet at one point, we probably had 20 cows that weighed 1,800 pounds or more.”

The reason the pendulum continuously seems to shift away from extremes in the cattle business is the negative consequences which always become evident over time.

The Larsons found structural soundness to be imperative to the longevity of large-framed, heavyweight cattle, not to mention the fertility challenges which accompanied these massive cattle. Larson was relieved to notice cattle began to moderate in the mid to late '90s, and from

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The Larsons enjoy showing cattle and the camaraderie that results, but their primary focus is on production females and herd bulls.

that transition and growth, the seasoned cattleman is pleased with where the industry currently stands. “To me, right now I think cattle are more in tune with the commercial industry than they have been for a while,” he says.



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The Larsons’ farm, like many others in Wisconsin, also included a small herd of Holstein cows that provided a bimonthly milk check as a contribution to the farm’s income alongside the cow herd. In 2003, the dairy cows were sold due to a labor shortage and a desire to expand the Hereford herd.

The decision was made to expand the cow herd to approximately 200 cows, and 48 bred heifers were purchased from the late Ray Johnson of Lake Bronson, Minn.

“They were some very, very good females. They had lots of longevity, which I really appreciated about them,” Larson says. “It gave us a little influx of some new genetics and we could go some different directions with them.”

Practical and problem-free

Especially pleasing to Larson, and Hereford breeders across the country, is the increasing recognition of the value of Hereford genetics in the commercial cattle business.

“We’ve been selling more and more bulls into black cow herds,” Larson explains. “I feel like the American Hereford Association’s advertising campaign on the baldy is paying off here.”

Outside of the occasional sale consignment, the Larsons sell approximately 45 bulls private treaty off the farm each year. The farm also routinely exhibits a pen of Hereford bulls at Denver in order to connect with breeders across the country. In 2019, Larson Hereford Farm exhibited the Champion Yearling Pen of 3, marking the family’s first division win in their 20 years of exhibiting at the National Western Stock Show.

“People pretty soon start to remember you out there,” he explains. “They come and say ‘I remember that pen of bulls you had out here three or four years ago, I really liked them’ — that has opened up a lot of doors for us.”

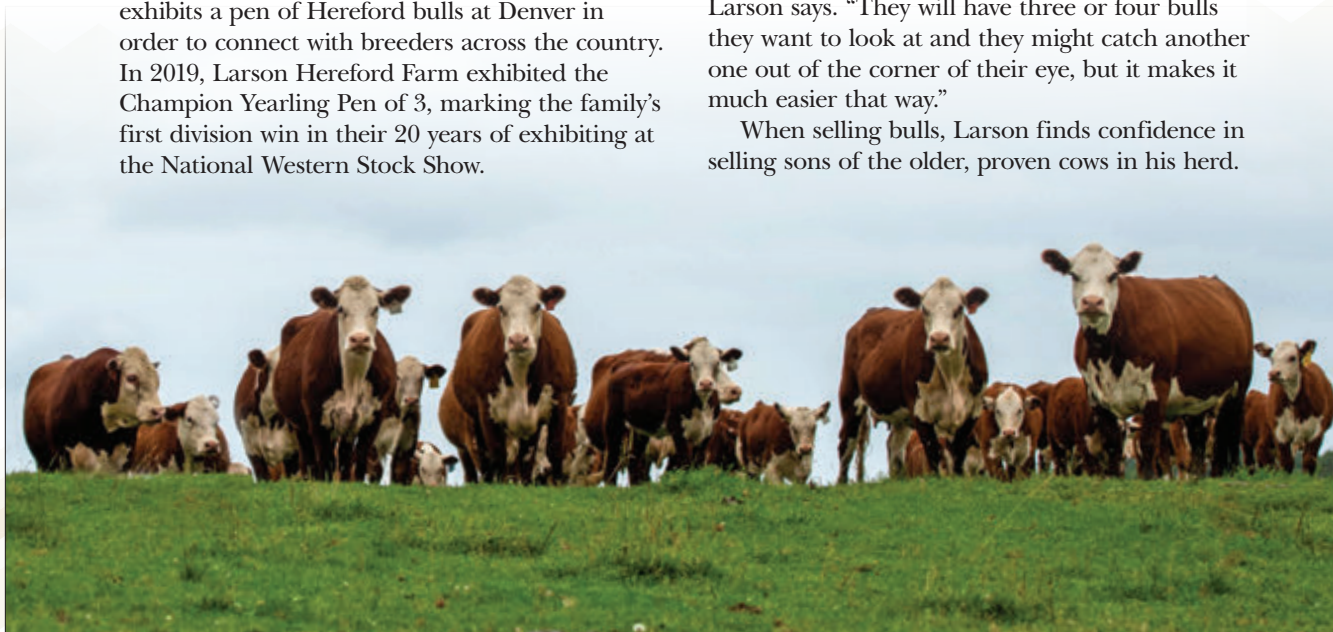
Whether on-farm or at Denver, customer service is of utmost importance to the success of Larson’s marketing efforts. Detailed records are kept of customers and their purchases, and Larson utilizes those records to guide his customers in future purchases.

“We try and take really good care of our customers,” he says. “We are at the point now where probably half of my buyers just call me and say, ‘I need a bull, you know what I like.’ It’s gratifying to me that people trust us.”

With the transition into the digital age, marketing their sale cattle has become a much more efficient process. Pedigrees and performance data — the Larsons have collected the latter since the ’60s — on all sale bulls are posted on the farm’s website for customers to view. The Larsons also utilize a Facebook page to aid in promoting their cattle, replacing previous consignment ads run in state agricultural publications.

“I’m always amazed that it used to be people would come and we would have to walk through all 40 or 45 bulls and now I get a lot of people that come over and they have looked at the website,” Larson says. “They will have three or four bulls they want to look at and they might catch another one out of the corner of their eye, but it makes it much easier that way.”

When selling bulls, Larson finds confidence in selling sons of the older, proven cows in his herd.



Larson uses AI sires as a starting point for purchasing herd bulls. “I’ll get some semen on a bull I like for whatever reason and if we get the kind of calves I’m happy with, we’ll go out and find a really good son of that bull and put them to work as a herd bull,” he explains.



The top 40% of male calves are kept as bulls, and the rest run in the feedlot until they are harvested and marketed locally.

"When I go to buy a bull, we concentrate on their mother every bit as much as the bull himself," he explains. "I think that's a good philosophy to have in selling bulls. If I've got a 10-, 11- or 12-year-old cow that does not have an issue, boy it is really easy to sell those bulls."

Larson acknowledges changes on the farm helped dictate their decisions moving forward. A feedlot was added to get steers fed to market weight more efficiently, and artificial insemination and embryo transfer (ET) work are also utilized.

"I think the first ET we did, the guy came into the kitchen in our house in '83," Larson says.

"He dumped all that stuff right on my kitchen counter, right on my frying pan!" Lori adds.

The Larsons do not routinely flush cows but, instead, choose to capitalize when 'the right cow' comes along. "A lot of times, that's a cow that's getting up there in years," Larson says. "She has proven to me she is one of those problem-free cows that has high production capabilities and something to offer not just us, but the breed."

The common thread: good people

Trends in the industry shift. The popularity of each breed ebbs and flows. The markets rise and fall. But through everything, the constant factor has been the presence of good people in the lives of the Larson family.

Through years of selling stock, showing and representing the membership, both Fred and Lori have met amazing Hereford breeders they now consider close friends. Outside of the people they have met through the Hereford business, the Larson family itself gives a heartbeat to the operation. The third, fourth and fifth generations of the family all contribute to the farm today.

Thanks to input from Lori, Larson describes their decision-making process as double-layered.

"I appreciate my wife's contribution to things," Larson says. "She is not a farm girl and has

educated herself very much on the cattle and I trust her judgment quite a bit on things."

Larson says he likes to give Lori a hard time about one bull-buying trip in particular, when a young prospect that was a bit rough-around-the-edges caught Fred's eye.

"When I first saw him, I was ready to buy him on the spot and Lori said, 'What do you like about that calf?'" Larson says.

The calf was named Voodoo, and he went on to be calf champion and senior champion at Denver.

"That was the bull that kind of put us on the map," Larson explains. "So, I like to give her a hard time about that."

Aside from the good-hearted jokes, there is no doubt Fred and Lori Larson have a relationship made strong through the years of working cattle and raising their two sons on the farm.

Easten works for a custom-harvest operation and currently manages the farm's approximately 1,500 acres of crop land and machinery, houses the fall calving-herd, and regularly assists his parents with the day-to-day management of the cattle and the farm. Older brother Justin works in the Twin Cities but still assists in taking promotional pictures of the cattle and farm.

Larson's parents, Jerry and Joyce, live on the farm in the house where they raised their family. "My dad, he's 81, and he is still the first guy up in the morning around here," Larson says. "But we all try to talk about bigger decisions and where we are headed as much as we can."

Commitment to family and to collaboration has made the Larson Hereford Farm withstand more than a century of changes in the Larsons' family, their land and their cattle. The test of time can be the most difficult obstacle a family farm can face. It takes grit, determination and a downright love for the land, family and livestock. But the Larson family knows all that, because their farm passed the test of time many years ago. **HW**



Hereford cattle and their farm in northwest Wisconsin runs in the Larson family's blood. "Through the generations, there's always been someone in the pipeline, so to speak, coming down the road for the farm."