

Beyond Their Expectations



Hereford breeders made their maiden voyage to the hub of livestock shows and networked with industry elite.

by **Christy Couch Lee**

Whether you are 5 or 65, you never forget that first trip to the National Western Stock Show (NWSS) in Denver. Entering the Coliseum on the “Hill” for the first time, being surrounded by the elite breeders and cattle of the nation. Walking down the hill to the “Yards,” and being transported back in time – actually feeling the history as you walk the catwalk and witness cattlemen in their element.

This year, several Hereford breeders made their first trek to this prestigious event to compete in the rings and to market their genetics.

Their backgrounds are diverse, but two factors unite each of these operations: the love of Herefords and the love of family.

Anna Merritt

Merritt Land and Cattle, Altus, Okla.

National Junior Hereford Association member Anna Merritt, Altus, Okla., is living a family legacy in the Hereford breed. That legacy reached new heights when she and her family attended the NWSS for the first time this year.

Anna’s involvement in the Hereford industry began six generations ago when her great-great-great-great-grandfather decided to purchase his first few head. The Merritts remained involved in the breed for generations. Two years ago, Anna and her family – parents, Jack and Valerie, and sisters, Mary and Virginia – were inspired to compete on a national level.

“Whenever we would go to Oklahoma City and Denver, I’d think, ‘This would be so much fun to get the family into,’” Anna says. “We could start working together and getting this bond with each other. And it’s true. We three girls have had so much fun working together. My dad also helps with breaking the cattle, and mom helps with the genetics. So, it’s a full family operation.”

Anna says much work went into Denver preparations, including specializing feed rations, halter-breaking and practicing for the showring. The hard work paid off for the Merritts and resulted in a second-in-class, which to Anna was thrilling.

Outside the showring, the NWSS for Anna was an incredible networking and family experience.

“I’ve been able to get out of my comfort zone, meeting and talking with the big breeders,” she says. “The Hereford breed truly is a family.”



Anna Merritt

Bischoff Family

Ravine Creek Ranch, Huron, S.D.

For the Bischoffs with Ravine Creek Ranch, Huron, S.D., Herefords are also a family affair.

The Bischoff family operation began in 1906 when Jerry’s grandfather purchased the ranch north of Huron, S.D. Since 1949, Herefords have been a part of the ranch. As the years have progressed, so has the business. Today, three generations are involved in the daily operation, including an annual production sale held every March.



Jerry Bischoff

“We sell mostly to commercial customers, and most of our bulls go onto black cows within about a 100-mile radius of our ranch,”

Jerry says. “We usually sell some yearling and 2-year-old bulls, and test those yearling bulls and deliver them to them usually in May, after they’re semen tested and ready to be used.”

Jerry says this trip to the NWSS brought generations together, and it was the younger generation who talked him into bringing their first string this year.

“We thought we had a little extra special set of calves this year and thought maybe we could do pretty well,” he says. And “pretty well” they did – exhibiting a class winner and a reserve division champion in the pen show.



Matt Bischoff

Matt, Jerry’s son, has been involved in the operation since his college graduation in 2006. He says he believed 2020 was the year for the Bischoffs to showcase their offering at the NWSS for the first time.

“I finally decided that as we’ve continued to better our genetics and use more artificial insemination and embryo transfer work, we thought our bulls were good enough where we’d get some more exposure and more people would see them,” he says.

Jeremiah Johnson, Jerry’s nephew, manages the show string for Ravine Creek. He says showing in the Yards was an incredible experience.

“The Yard show is really special because it’s our genetics – cattle we have bred and calved out,” Jeremiah says. “We get to see them from calves all the way up to what they are today, and that is something very special to us at Ravine Creek Ranch.”

Jerry says visiting with customers is a perk of exhibiting at the NWSS. For Matt? Simply taking part in such a prestigious event.

“It was a goal to show our cattle at one of the premier shows in the world,” he says. “So, it’s a pretty exciting and humbling experience.”

Jeremiah says they have learned a few lessons during their first NWSS. First, bedding.

“It takes a lot more for the cattle to stand on and sleep in, and that’ll be something that’s just a learning curve for next year,” he says.

Much work goes into setting up pens, he says.

“There’s a lot more that goes into setting up your pen than what the eye might see, including having extra boards or screws that’ll actually work, or the right kind of zip ties and tarps,” Jeremiah says. “And it is important to have a good pen, because that adds eye appeal to your cattle.”

Echoing Anna’s advice, Jerry says preparation is key for success at the NWSS.

“Get your homework done at home,” he says. “Get them fed; and get them ready, washed up and taken care of. Then get some good help to help you to get here.”

And if you’re unsure about attending the NWSS? Matt says, do it.

“If you’re on the fence about it, go for it. I mean, you don’t really have anything to lose,” Matt says. “It’s great exposure and I kind of wish we would have come sooner. It’s been an exciting experience.”

Noack Herefords

Rockdale, Texas

For the Noack family of Rockdale, Texas, their trip to the NWSS was a continuation of a family tradition begun generations ago.



Steven Noack

The Noacks have raised Herefords since 1921, when E.H. Noack began the program. Steven Noack says his dad, Leon, exhibited at the NWSS in the early years.

“I have run into a lot of people that have said, ‘I knew your dad,’” Steven says. “My grandfather was also in the oil business, and so most of my life has been oil-related. I’m a petroleum engineer. I always grew up with the ranch and always been around the ranch itself, but I never really got into the show side of it.”

Fortunately, Steven says, his niece, Shiloh Doehring, and her husband, Vernie, do have experience in the showing. They returned to manage the operation in 2014 and talked the family into returning to the NWSS Yards show again in 2020.



Shiloh Doehring

“My great granddaddy ran the operation his whole life, put a lot of hard work into it, and made some good genetic investments,” Shiloh says. “This year, we decided to come back to Denver. I feel like it’s an opportunity that you don’t get anywhere else. You would hope that someone would pull into your driveway and want to look at your cows. Probably a lot of people want to, but they can’t for whatever reason. To have the cattle here in a central location is a great opportunity.”

Steven says he appreciates the differences in cattle from the Yards to the Hill.

“There are a lot of similarities in the animals, but the environment is definitely different,” he says. “I’m enjoying the people and the cattle I’ve seen. Everybody’s been really friendly, and it’s been a great experience.”

Shiloh is proud of the set her family exhibited this year because “they are ready to turn out on cows.”

“There is one in here, I pulled off the heifers the day that we left home, and I’m going to put him straight back when we get there,” she says. “I think quite a bit of him. He’s not fat and sassy, but this is the yard show. It’s for commercial cattle, and we’re here to meet a need.”

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Barnes Herefords Cedartown, Ga.

He has accomplished tremendous career goals throughout his lifetime. But this year, Roy Barnes, Barnes Herefords, Cedartown, Ga., says a lifetime goal was reached when he exhibited Herefords at the NWSS.



Roy Barnes

Roy grew up showing Herefords as a young man before attending law school. After a combined 22 years in the Georgia state senate and statehouse, he was elected Georgia governor in 1998, serving until 2003. Although his political career was demanding, Roy never lost sight of his roots and remained loyal to the Hereford breed. Today, he and his family run about 150 registered Hereford and 250 commercial cows on two farms in the state. They hold a female sale each spring and a bull sale each fall.

From the time he was a child, Roy had dreams of attending the NWSS.

“Well, ever since I was a kid, I’ve heard about Denver and I’ve always wanted to come,” Roy says. “The NWSS is the premier show and sale that exists. So, I finally decided that I didn’t care what was going to happen. I was going to come this year.”

Roy says the distance to the NWSS was one of the biggest obstacles to exhibiting for the first time at the NWSS.

“It’s not impossible, of course, and it’s done all the time, but it was still a good little distance to haul our cattle,” he smiles. “And for us Southerners with thin blood, 20-degree weather is a shock to our system.”

Despite the challenges, Roy says, his first trip to the NWSS did not disappoint.

“You get to see, from the interaction of all the folks, really what is necessary to succeed in the seedstock business. The networking is invaluable,” he says.

The nostalgia associated with the NWSS is remarkable, Roy says.

“Let me tell you, it is exactly what I foresaw and even more,” he says. “I mean, it’s the old stockyards of course. My daddy was a cow trader, and I went to stockyards with him all of my life. And, it brought back some very fond memories of my father. Also, the atmosphere of the hall of champions, going back for so far, is sobering and impressive.”

Kevin Atkins, Barnes Herefords manager, says attending the NWSS has been a tremendous experience.

“This is well worth it,” Kevin says. “The best of the best is here, and everybody’s been great. Everything’s lived up to its expectations. It’s been wonderful. I recommend anybody from the South and the East to come out to Denver and enjoy this experience and learn.”

The transition from a career in politics to raising Herefords is easier than one might think, Roy says.

“I came back from law school and I got into politics, which is either good or bad,” he laughs. “It was a great experience, but I believe I’ll just raise cows, and won’t get back into politics. Those cows don’t talk back to me, like some of those politicians did.”

Traveling the state of Georgia brought Roy face to face with beef producers.

“Well, everybody thinks all we do in Georgia is raise cotton, peaches and peanuts,” he says. “But the truth of the matter is, Georgia’s a fairly large beef producer. Even with Atlanta’s 5 million people, agriculture is still the number-one employer in Georgia.”

Herefords are amongst his favorite herds. “When I was governor and was traveling the state, I’d always head to where they had cattle, particularly Herefords, which were my favorites,” he says. “That’s what my daddy had, and my Uncle Fred, and my Uncle Felton, and they’re so gentle. Herefords are also really a great beef producer.”

“This is well worth it. The best of the best is here, and everybody’s been great. Everything’s lived up to its expectations. It’s been wonderful. I recommend anybody from the South and the East to come out to Denver and enjoy this experience and learn.”

— Kevin Atkins



Atkins Family

Hunt Family

Innisfail Farm, Madison, Ga.

Whitey Hunt bought his first Hereford heifers in 1972, just before marrying his wife, Lynn. From then on Innisfail Farm has consisted of generations working side by side.

“And I think I’ve created a monster with my son and grandson,” he says with a laugh. “They enjoy it as much, if not more than what I enjoyed through the years. It’s been a great experience.”

Dru Hunt, a junior in high school, is the grandson of Whitey and the son of Weyman. He has been showing Herefords around Georgia since fourth grade. And, he says, this year is his first trip to the NWSS, which he will always remember.

“I showed in the junior show on the Hill, and the pen bull show in the Yards,” Dru says. “It means a lot to me, and I’m really glad that I had the opportunity to be here. This experience has taught me to try your best and work hard, and good things will happen.”

Weyman serves as the Innisfail Farm manager. He says the family decided to make the trek to Denver in 2020, as marketing for their upcoming first production sale.

“We thought this would be a good opportunity to get in front of a lot of good people,” he says. “We have some genetics that are fresh and exciting, with a lot of marbling and carcass quality.”

He says the response was worth the trip.

“We had people show up in our pen from literally all over the world, including Finland,” Weyman says. “It’s about a 1,500-mile trip for us, and seeing people from all around the world and even from our home state of Georgia, has been really exciting.”

As Weyman looks forward to the next NWSS trip, he is excited to see the new Yard facilities because he feels presentation of your pens plays a crucial role in attracting potential customers.

“This is ultimately a trade show with live cattle, and you need to come prepared to impress people,” Weyman says. “You need to have a good pen. It needs to look nice, and people need to enjoy coming in your pen.”

Weyman recommends if you are considering making the trip to the NWSS, lean on others in the industry for assistance.

“If you need a little help, call people and ask,” he says. “Everybody in the Hereford breed is so friendly. There are many things here that we don’t have to worry about at home — like water heaters, and making sure your hoses are empty every night. But we’ve had so much help from people from across the country.”

Adequate help is also a necessity — especially with a string on the Hill and another in the Yards, he adds.



Hunt Family

“Showing on the Hill and being in the Yards requires a lot of coordination, as it’s a pretty good walk between the two,” Weyman says. “Also, getting three head ready at the same time for the pen show takes a lot of work. This is something you can’t do without a lot of help, and everybody around here is so willing to help.”

And, he says, reasonable expectations are required for your first NWSS outing.

“I expected the cattle here to be phenomenal, and I would say that they were better than I expected them to be,” Weyman says. “So, coming out here your first time, don’t get too disappointed in how it goes. There’s a pretty steep learning curve, and trying to get your ducks in a row out here is not very easy when you’re being compared to a lot of the best people in the world.” **HW**

Mile High participation

The Hunts were honored to consign Innisfail Energy 4021 1837 ET, a Sept. son of NJW 79Z Z311 Endure 1730 ET, in the Mile High Night Sale. Barnes Herefords, Cedartown, Ga., purchased two-thirds interest and full possession on this bull for \$40,000.

“I might get kind of teared up here, but it meant a lot to be accepted into that sale as well as we were last night,” Weyman says.

As well, the Hunts gave back in a big way — purchasing the Lot 1 Foundation Female, PCC New Mexico Lady 8170, for \$70,000 to benefit the Hereford Youth Foundation of America (HYFA).

“My family has always wanted to give back and try to help,” Weyman says. “And my dad, in particular, has always felt that giving back to the youth was the way to do it.”

Whitey says it’s simply about the future.

“We need to keep the future of Hereford youth moving forward,” Whitey says. “We’ve got to support them in every way. The NJHA (National Junior Hereford Association) is a great opportunity for young people to learn skills, work with people, and develop communication skills. And to the Hereford youth? Keep up the hard work.”

Weyman says the people of the Hereford breed set it apart.

“Everybody’s so helpful, so friendly, so accepting,” he says. “It’s the people really that make the difference.” **HW**