



# Always Shoot Straight

Inspired by two Hereford icons, Martha Dixon of Hartsville, Tenn., lives by dignity and work ethic.

by *Diane Meyer*

Martha Dixon was 21 when she met “The Duke.” He was easily the tallest man in Casa Grande Hotel’s banquet room, dressed in a tuxedo and larger than life. The walls inside the Stanfield, Ariz., hotel echoed with the chatter of hundreds of elegantly dressed cattlemen, businessmen and Hollywood stars.

Martha, who had made the trip from Hartsville, Tenn., for the 26 Bar Ranch sale, grabbed her father’s arm and said, “There’s John Wayne!”

“No, it’s not,” he said, to which she replied, “Yeah, it is!”

So she shot straight. “I just walked up to him, told him who I was and shook his hand, and his

photographer took a picture of us,” Martha recalls. “I guess if John Wayne had been selling chimpanzees, I’d be in the registered monkey business now.”

It was 1971, just before her graduation from Middle Tennessee State University. Her father had read an article in *Progressive Farmer* about Wayne’s cattle sale, so they trekked across the country to buy their first registered Hereford bull, the last bull lot in the sale. In the years to follow, Martha and Wayne became good friends — a friendship which inspired her to give back to the next generation.

## The gift

When Wayne’s cancer took over, Martha and her father went out West for one last visit. The day after their return to Tennessee, the Duke passed away at age 72 on June 11, 1979. That summer, the Kettle family of Kansas gifted a \$1,000 scholarship in Wayne’s name, which was awarded at the 1980 National Western Stock Show in Denver.

With no foreseeable plans to keep the scholarship going, Martha took action as the youngest and newly elected Hereford Auxiliary board director.

“The Duke had been so good to me, and I thought so much of him that I wanted to continue the scholarship,” she says. “He was so good to people. He loved kids, and he loved Hereford cattle.”

The first funds for the annual scholarship came from a quilt the American Hereford Auxiliary auctioned at the American Hereford Association’s (AHA) Annual Meeting, which sold for a whopping \$2,500.

Next, Martha asked Wayne’s business partner and friend, Louis Johnson, to donate \$1,000 to the cause. He agreed, so long as Martha matched his contribution. She did.



Martha and John Wayne share a laugh at a 26 Bar Ranch after-sale gathering. Martha remembers Wayne as a man who loved to laugh, loved life and defended his country and his beliefs.



One of Wayne's original, signed calling cards and bandanas still bring luck to River Circle Farm. Martha wore this bandana when she won her first Dixie National.



As a special thank-you to Martha, the late Bud Snidow painted this picture of the "Lot 66" cow and her calf. Lot 66 is one of the first five registered River Circle Farm cows purchased from 26 Bar Ranch.

Several others followed suit, but no one made a bigger difference than Bud Snidow. Naturally, the artist auctioned an original Snidow painting in support, and all proceeds went to the scholarship.

Snidow's influence, as well as former Auxiliary president Lois Schlickau, ensured the future of the John Wayne Memorial Scholarship, for which Martha is forever grateful. "Bud is the greatest gentleman I've ever known. Ever. He did so much for so many people," she says.

In Bud's honor, Martha, Bonnie Coley and other auxiliary directors started the annual Bud Snidow Award — a buckle given to a junior who embodies the former AHA assistant secretary's spirit.

"They have to show great character, integrity, honesty, kindness and generosity," Martha describes. "It is like the Hereford award for Miss Congeniality."

The act of kindness certainly touched Snidow, who sent Martha a Christmas card every year with a paragraph sharing how much the award meant to him.

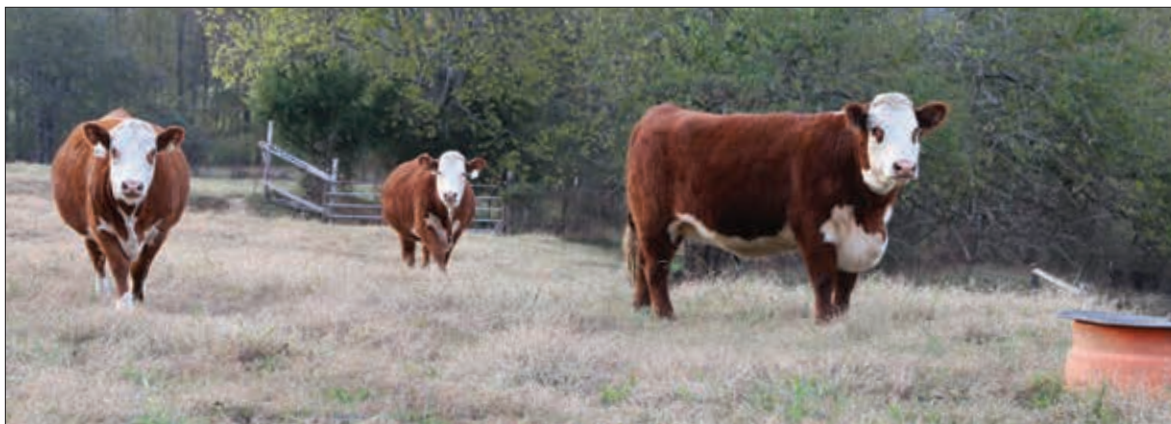
For the Tennessee cattlegwoman, her proudest achievements are establishing these scholarships. "That's what you need to do is work with the kids," she says. "You should try to do anything you can to change one life in your lifetime."

### The farm

Rewarding hard work no doubt stems from Martha's strong work ethic. Her family farmed in Trousdale County since 1911, and her dad garnered up 2,800 acres with 450 commercial cows. In 1973, she returned to the Hartsville farm, nestled on the Cumberland River about 45 miles northeast of Nashville.

In an old barn, the recent college graduate stumbled across a 20-by-4.5 foot mural of two mules, two horses and a barn with "River Circled Farm" faintly legible on the wood. She always wanted a unique brand, so she adopted "River Circle Farm" as her own. The first River Circle Farm calves came out

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In the 1970s, Martha fell in love with a carload of bulls she saw at the National Western Stock Show. The bulls were exhibited by Dale and Mary Barber of Channing, Texas. To this day, she still admires their breeding program. These three bred heifers at River Circle Farm are all bred to Barber bulls.

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Pictured is RC Bohlin 307 ET, a River Circle Farm bull that was twice named AHA Southeast Show Bull of the Year and was a reserve champion at the North American International Livestock Expo in Louisville, Ky.



Herefords thrive in the Southeast's humidity and abundant grasses, which is a big reason why River Circle Farm only uses Hereford bulls in its breeding program.

of the original 26 Bar Ranch bull and five 26 Bar cows, purchased in 1972, the year after the bull.

"I just fell in love with Hereford cattle," Martha says. The breed brought success to her show string and added pounds to the commercial herd. Over time, Hereford genetics added 75 pounds of weaning weight to a traditionally black-hided herd.

"Cattle have to be robust and have to be tough to make it here. We're using all Hereford bulls right now, and it's worked really well," she says.

River Circle Farm is now a 700-acre operation home to more than 20 head of registered Hereford cows and 100 commercial cows, which Martha manages with Julie Chapin. A native of northern Ohio, Julie ventured to Murfreesboro, Tenn., to attend Middle Tennessee State University on a recommendation from former AHA northeast field representative Chip Carrier. She has called the "Agriculture and Commerce" state home ever since.

Julie manages the embryo transfer (ET) and in vitro fertilization (IVF) programs, which she has fine-tuned for the last decade, along with a focused nutrition program. This year, all females were bred by artificial insemination (AI), and they will calve out close to 40 head.

"Nutrition is probably the most important thing we do here," she says. "You can take a marginal calf and turn it into something outstanding if you understand the feeding aspect of it."

Both Martha and Julie are quick to point out it was not luck that sustained the operation to this point. It has been a lifetime of learning and sticking to their guns on the type of cattle they need.



Established in the "Heart of Tennessee," River Circle Farm is located on the picturesque Cumberland River in Hartsville.



Martha Dixon (l) and Julie Chapin (r) manage River Circle Farm, home to 20 registered Hereford cows and 100 commercial cows.

### The drive

As Martha will tell you point blank, “Everything I learned, I learned the hard way. . . . You read, you look at other people’s cattle, you get beat and you learn.”

A driven cattlegirl, Martha’s biggest love is the showring. “I love being in the showring more than anything I’ve ever done,” she describes. “When the only thing you hear is your heart beating, and you forget to breathe and you’re just standing there, dead-eyeing that judge — I just love it.”

Even more than the thrill of showing, it is the people they meet which mean the most to the River Circle Farm managers. “I’ll forget the cattle, but I’ll never forget the people,” Martha says.

They hope to give back to a livelihood that has given them so much. Julie, who served as the first female president of the Tennessee Hereford Association, says the most important thing is to “do what needs to be done. Being fair is my number one job.”

Through scholarships and rewarding hard work, Martha hopes to instill the lessons she has learned in the next generation: Going after what you want, getting out exactly what you put in and working as hard as you can for what you love.

Above all, she lives by the words spoken by her role model, John Wayne: “Always shoot straight. Always have dignity.”

With the help of Martha’s grit, John Wayne’s legacy will forever be stamped on the Hereford breed, and his giving nature lives on in his dear friend from Tennessee.

“Whatever you think of him is actually how he was, because he was actually a good guy,” Julie says.

“No, he was better,” Martha says.

No doubt, The Duke felt the same way about his dear Tennessee friend.

On a trip to Nashville, Wayne met up with Martha and her mother. Shooting straight like he always did, The Duke shook hands with Martha’s mom for the first time and said, “Miss Dixon, you got one hell of a daughter.” **HW**



River Circle Farm utilizes ET and IVF technologies in its breeding program. This year, all females were bred AI.