

Faith and Family

Jim Birdwell, of Fletcher, Okla., shares memories of life's toughest trials and greatest blessings.

by *Grace Vehige*

“I always tried to treat people like I'd like to be treated,” says Jim Birdwell of Fletcher, Okla. “Everybody deserves respect in their life for what they do.”

Life is simple as that for Birdwell, a cattleman who stands firm in faith, his philosophies hewn by years of hard work and time spent with family and friends.

The luck of the draw

The Birdwell legacy started with a land drawing and a five-year commitment. The family made their home in Fletcher, Okla., by drawing a quarter section out of a lottery for the land available for settlement. Thanks to the Homestead Act of 1862, the Birdwells just needed to live and work the land for five years before it became theirs.

Jim continues to live and farm on the property originally gained by his great-grandfather. He still has the original deed, signed by President Teddy Roosevelt.

“My great-grandfather died before they lived there five years, but his wife Sarah raised all the kids who, of course, were able to do a lot of the farm work,” Jim explains.



Jim and Jeanne Birdwell, Fletcher, Okla., began their journey on the ranch in 1972, and they have lived there ever since.

In 2007, the town of Fletcher held a centennial celebration and honored families in the area who still owned land gained in the lottery all those years ago. The Birdwells were just one of two families honored.

“At a hundred years, I filled out the paperwork and turned it in to the state of Oklahoma, and now we are an Oklahoma Centennial Farm,” says the proud cattleman.

Meeting Jeanne

Jim attended Oklahoma State University (OSU) to study agricultural education. After graduation, he headed to Union City, Okla., to teach high school agriculture courses.

He recalls a quick-kindled friendship with the owner of the local service station, as well as with



Jim Birdwell's grandfather, Ben Birdwell, was raised on the family's homestead. He encouraged his children to uphold their legacy.

those who frequented the gathering place for coffee and conversation.

"I would go over there as the agriculture teacher after school, and all the farmers would be there. It was a good place to visit everybody," Jim explains.

Not only did Jim befriend the owner of the station, but he also taught his son in school. Little did he know, however, he would soon be introduced to someone new: his future wife, and the station owner's daughter, Jeanne.

"[Jeanne] was a freshman at OSU, when I came to Union City to teach agriculture ... I was friends with her dad before she ever came around," Jim recalls. "She came home one summer, worked at

the station and washed windows and cars. That is when we met."

Jim and Jeanne married, and in 1972, they made the move from Union City to Fletcher in order to buy the land across from the family's homestead. They have been there ever since.

Seizing opportunity

Jim taught high school students for five years and then the Lord had other plans for his future.

Ed Meacham was the head of the Western field staff of the American Polled Hereford Association (APHA). He called Jim about an opening on the field staff, which he accepted.

"I had to sell \$20,000 worth of advertising. The drawback was you could buy a page of advertising for about \$300 at that time," Jim says.

He served APHA members in Oklahoma and Kansas from 1972 to 1975, before he found his true calling. Jim travelled with Eddie Sims, auctioneer and owner of National Cattle Services, Inc. Sims gave him a new appreciation for the auction business.



Birdwell began his auction business in the summer of 1978, and since then, has become a household name.

Fortunately for Jim, Sims' business expansion came at an opportune time, and he was able to begin work with National Cattle Services, Inc., in 1975.

"I never did go to an official auctioneer school, but I learned the business and listened to a lot of different auctioneers," Jim explains. "I would practice going up and down the road and kind of developed a chant that didn't run people out of the barn."

Just three years after joining National Cattle Services, Jim decided to utilize his

cattle marketing skills to launch his own auction business in the summer of '78.

"I ran a third of an advertising column in the *Hereford World* and wrote a little letter to people to tell them I was going in the auction business," the award-winning auctioneer says.

Between Jim's contacts with the registered cattle business and his increased advertising efforts, he was able to auction at a variety of

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sales. One phone call, however, set the tone for his auction business.

“We were just getting ready to go to my son’s basketball game, and I’ll never forget. It was February, and the telephone rang. I thought I better answer it because it might be someone wanting to have a sale,” Jim recalls. “I answered it, and it was Jim Leachman.”



The Birdwell family legacy lives on through children and grandchildren (l to r) Joel, Judson, Jhett, Jarret and Bridget Birdwell; Jim and Jeanne Birdwell; and Pete, Jamie, Trevor and Cheyenne White.

“He always reminded us that the registered business was a cattle business, but cattle were a by-product of the people. And I never forgot that.”

— Jim Birdwell, speaking of his good friend, Orville Sweet

As a result of that call, Jim not only had the opportunity to be one of the auctioneers at a major bull sale, but he also made lifelong connections that would serve him well into his future.

Last fall, Jim retired from the auction business, but his many years of service to the livestock industry across the United States and Canada are not soon forgotten.

One door closes, another opens

Jim’s first livestock venture began with a stocker operation. In the early 1970s, he says running stocker cattle was the ideal business.

“It was working out good for me because I was going to sales and stock shows and all that kind of stuff trying to sell advertising,” Jim says.

Then came 1973. Food inflation was rampant, including the price of beef. Many cattle producers, like Jim, figured the longer they held their cattle, the higher the sale price. No one could have guessed that in March that year, president Richard Nixon would impose ceilings on the wholesale and retail prices of beef and other meats. Later, he lifted tariffs on beef imported to the U.S.

“I am not sure exactly the figures, but I could have sold [the stocker calves] for 59 cents coming off wheat pasture, which would have been a good, good deal,” Jim explains. “Well, the price did not go up. It went down, and I sold those cattle away for something around 39 cents.”

While that was the end of his stocker business, it was just the beginning of the Birdwell family’s next great journey.

Jim travelled to Ransom, Kan., for a set of polled Hereford heifers from Gus Hendergarth. He purchased them for \$250 a head, with the registration papers.

“I brought them down here, and they put me in the registered cattle business. We have been in the business since 1973, and my kids have been raised up in it. The rest of it is history, I guess,” Jim says with a smile.

The ties that bind

The cattle business has always been a stronghold for the Birdwell family. Joel and Jamie, the two Birdwell children, both attended Oklahoma State University, just like Jim and Jeanne, and stayed connected to the cattle business upon graduation.

Jamie married Pete White of Sterling, Okla., who has worked closely with TransOva and Reprologix over the years.

Joel married his wife, Bridget, and they currently reside in Kingfisher, Okla. Joel's family works alongside the Birdwell Ranch in Fletcher to produce Hereford and Angus cattle for the commercial buyer.

"It has taken a long time, since 1973, to get us to a point that we felt like we had accomplished some things we wanted to," Jim says. "You never get them exactly the way you want them, but we've had some success the last few years or so. We started selling commercial bulls, and they are

working good for people. Repeat customers are all you can ask for."

The Birdwell children have maintained a close connection with the Hereford breed, including being active in the junior association and Joel serving as the 2020 American Hereford Association President.

With the five Birdwell grandchildren growing up around the business, the legacy of the family lives on.

A people business

As any cattleman knows, the business has its ups and downs. "This is where the good Lord put me," says Jim with a laugh.

Orville Sweet, who served as the APHA executive secretary from 1963-1979 and as one of Birdwell's good friends, imparted advice that has influenced many of Jim's decisions over the years.

"He always reminded us that the registered business was a cattle business, but cattle were a by-product of the people. And I never forgot that," Jim recalls. "I tried to use that same philosophy. Even though I did like good cattle and all of that, the people were still the most important part of all of it." **HW**



Birdwell admires his herd summering beneath the slick hills of Oklahoma.