

# Grace with Grit

Lilla Bell: Hereford Lady of the West

by Kim Holt

“Mom and I would spend hours driving through the purebreds sometimes talking about the cattle, sometimes not talking at all.

On the warm spring days I would turn off the side-by-side (UTV) and watch the cows graze. The calves would always walk up to Mom’s side. Mom’s eyes would sparkle, she would smile, put her hand out and the calf would smell her hand or lick it. How many thousands of times did Mom have that encounter in her life and every time it was a special moment. I felt her love for her Hereford cattle like this all the time.

I was blessed to have shared her wisdom of life and cattle, but the emotion behind actions that you can’t describe were at the surface when we were checking our cattle. She truly loved her Hereford cattle and was quick to pull out pictures from her purse and show everyone her life’s work.”

— son Dan Bell. He and his wife, Theresa, and their son, Shane, continue Lilla’s legacy and genetics, raising purebred Herefords.

Lilla Bell’s cattle friends were many and their respect for this Western lady was even greater. She was the breeder, caretaker, record keeper and labor behind the registered cattle at Bell Ranch. She built her Hereford cow herd from the ground up at Paradise Valley, Nev. Her family and the real-world cattle here were, as she put it, “her loves.”

“Lilla was really a cattle person — and I don’t say that lightly,” says Lucy Rechel of Snyder Livestock Company, Inc. (SLC) at Yerington, Nev. “There are some people who are good at some aspects of the cattle business...but Lilla put it all together, in my opinion. She understood genetics and she understood genetics that worked in a pretty tough situation in Paradise Valley. She had a super high level of integrity and hard work.”

## Blazing trails

Lilla Bell’s Hereford story began in her youth. Although she grew up in two different worlds — her father worked in San Francisco and her mom had a ranch near Hollister, Calif. — she knew early on that ranching was her life’s calling. She and her siblings spent every spare moment of time at the ranch, where there were commercial Hereford cattle.

Lilla’s calling led her to be a trailblazer in production agriculture. She received a bachelor’s degree in animal husbandry from California Polytechnic State University (Cal Poly) at San Luis Obispo in 1960, the first woman to do so.

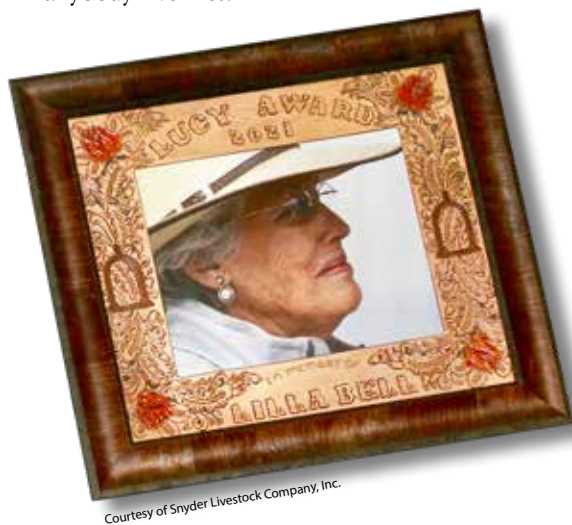
Lilla was also the first woman to compete on Cal Poly’s livestock judging team. Her team was the 1958 champion at the Cow Palace in San Francisco and the Golden Spike in Ogden, Utah. Lilla was the high-scoring individual at both contests. The team also competed at the National Western Stock Show and traveled by train to Chicago for the International Livestock Show.

Although she didn’t go on to judge livestock shows, Lilla had the ability.

“The fact that she won some college judging contests will tell you that she had a really good eye for cattle,” says her longtime friend Jackie

Davis of Lincoln, Calif. "If I was any place and she mentioned, 'Boy, I really like this one,' I sure went over and looked at it."

As a sale consultant and ranch manager, Davis traveled 44 states and Canadian provinces and met lots of cattle people in between. He says, "I would respect Lilla's opinion on any cow as much as anybody I've met."



Aside from having a good eye for cattle, Lilla was recognized as a leader from the Western states. In 1990, Lilla served on the American Polled Hereford Association's (APHA) Vision 2000 committee.

A year later, Davis, a former APHA board chairman asked Lilla to consider running for the position he was exiting. He told her the board needed a grassroots producer, someone like her with a good understanding of the cattle business.

### Committed to giving back

Keep in mind Lilla and her husband, Woodie, ranched 40 miles north of Winnemucca, Nev., the largest town close to the Bell Ranch. But, the closest commercial airport was in Reno, Nev., a nearly four-hour drive. Travel time was a limiting factor, but Lilla was always willing to invest time in volunteer leadership.

Lilla served on the APHA board from 1992 to 1995, representing five Western states. She brought the experience and knowledge of raising registered and commercial cattle in arid, high-desert conditions and marketing bulls to Western ranches. Lilla was named chair of the APHA board in 1995, the first and only time a woman held the position. That particular year was historic for another reason: she presided during the merger of APHA and the American Hereford Association (AHA).

"The merger was quite a challenge when I was chairman," Lilla recalled in 2004. "But, I could

really work with the horned people. I got along really well with them, and I really respected them. And I felt they did the same with me."



Lilla encouraged APHA and AHA memberships to think in terms of "all of us" rather than "we" or "they." She also recognized most of the commercial beef cattle industry viewed the breed as one. She shared that fact with the APHA membership as it stood ready to vote.

"This was a difficult time in Hereford history, with merger discussions and debate, but Lilla was the perfect leader to help get the merger accomplished," says Jane Evans Cornelius of Coyote Ridge Ranch, LaSalle, Colo., who served on the APHA board with Lilla. "Her ladylike, straightforward demeanor soothed worries and all understood the common goal. But, under her quiet calm were toughness and savvy. She was extremely knowledgeable about the entire cattle industry and the Hereford breed. Everyone respected her logic, wisdom and dedication. She exemplified grace with grit. Much of the success the breed is enjoying today can be attributed to Lilla's leadership during a critical period."

Besides serving APHA, she was a director for the California-Nevada Polled Hereford Association for more than 20 years, a member of the Nevada Cattlemen's Association and a member of the Fallon Bull Sale Committee, where she also served as a committee sifting member. Plus, Lilla was a 4-H club advisor when her grandkids showed cattle.



Lilla Bell was inducted into the AHA Hall of Fame in 2012. "If you look up the word 'Lady' in the dictionary, her picture is most likely there," say Tom and Cindy Weimer, Weimer Cattle Company, Susanville, Calif. "Lilla was a woman who was highly successful in the male-dominated purebred beef cattle industry. She was capable of wearing many hats. Lilla was comfortable tagging, tattooing and branding calves ... checking pastures on horseback...planning her breeding and marketing programs or sitting in the board room at the American Polled Hereford Association. She was a true 'Western Lady.'"

Of her willingness to serve, Lilla explained, "I just feel that the breed and the associations have done so much for me, I need to pay them back in a small way."

Lilla was inducted into the AHA Hall of Fame in 2012, the same year as Davis. Both Westerners were recognized for their lifelong service and dedication to the Hereford breed.

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Lilla's legacy lives on through three sons, Dean, John and Dan, and seven grandchildren: Dawson, Lilla "Lilly", Trase, Quint, Cade, Shane and Carly. She gifted a Hereford heifer to each one.

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### Raising tough, productive cattle

Lilla and Woodie moved their family to the Paradise Valley Ranch in 1978, two years after Bell Ranch joined APHA. Their three sons, Dean, John and Dan grew up with a rope in their hands, showed Hereford cattle in 4-H and FFA. Each one also competed in high school and college national rodeo finals; all carried cards in the Professional Rodeo Cowboys Association.

Paradise Valley is a tough, unforgiving part of the world. The high-desert rangelands here,

owned by the federal government, receive an average of 8-9 inches of rain annually.

"That's why Herefords or the Hereford-cross works," Lilla said, explaining that even in drought conditions, a high percentage of their registered and commercial cows bred and calved each year. "The fertility is extremely important to us here. It really shows up when we sell bulls."

Commercial cow-calf producers discovered and appreciated Bell Ranch bulls: moderate-framed, high fertility, volume, thickness, moderate birth weights and pigmentation. Plus, the genetics and the bulls were a product of the same harsh conditions where bull buyers ran their cattle.

Every year, Woodie and Lilla marketed 20-30 yearling and long-yearling Herefords to repeat bull customers in Nevada and surrounding states. For two decades, another 5-10 head were tested and sold through the Bulls of the 21st Century Test and Sale in Yerington, Nev.

Lilla worked hard to breed problem-free cattle, concentrating on udder and teat quality, fertility, calving ease, and adding as much milk and growth as the environment would allow. "We've really stressed getting rid of calving problems," Lilla explained. In part that was because she took care



BRL Call 100L earned national champion bull honors for Bell Ranch and Oregon's Allison Hay & Herefords in 2004. Lilla was thrilled, but said the award was a passing grade on the first test. "The next is that he will produce like himself. The third test will be when his daughters are in production and they produce like the five great cows on his dam's side." Lilla bred three and owned five of the dams on Call's maternal side.



of the registered herd on her own, other than weighing and tagging calves.

Bell Ranch used its own registered genetics to develop and improve its commercial F1 herd. Buyers appreciated the feeding potential of the moderate-framed calves, with excellent feed conversion and quality, as well as replacement heifer potential.

“Lilla was always known for producing registered Hereford cattle that would thrive in tough, arid country. In my early years as an AHA fieldman, I remember vividly the day BRL Call 100L won the National Western Stock Show in Denver and became her first national champion,” says Mark Holt, who served the Western region from 2002 to 2018. “Even

more, I recall Lilla telling me there were multiple generations of Bell Ranch cows on the bottom side of his pedigree. She was most proud of this. If you have, or ever plan to visit Paradise Valley, you would soon understand why.”

Lilla always focused on productive cow families, selecting herd bulls from the best or most productive females. About 70% of her decision was based on the bull’s dam, and it was definitely a plus if she was a Dam of Distinction. Bell Ranch has more than 60 Dams of Distinction to its credit.

Bell Ranch’s reputation for quality, problem-free cattle wasn’t lost on neighbors who stood in line to buy any of Lilla’s females that didn’t make the registered herd. However, she often was in a rebuilding phase due to the hardships associated with ranching on Nevada rangelands.

### A glass half full

A devastating range fire took 45 purebreds one year. Larkspur poisoning took out the heart of her herd another year. Then there was drought, water rights issues, snowstorms, calving cold spells, predators, and intervention by the Bureau of Land Management and Forest Service of USDA.

Lilla always remained upbeat, no matter the circumstances.

“If things are too easy, you don’t appreciate them as much,” she would say, explaining the setbacks made raising

registered cattle even more worthwhile. “It’s the life I love.” Her attitude and passion for that life was widely recognized.

“The respect and admiration Lilla earned from her peers and followers in the business was a direct testament to the way she lived her life,” Holt says. “Grace, honesty, and hard work followed her in everything she did. The Hereford breed, or any group for that matter, is better with a Lilla Bell in its presence.”

Lilla’s Bell Ranch legacy and genetics continue with her son Dan and his family. The Birdsall Family, Torrington, Wyo., also added a set of Bell Ranch mature cows. Her legacy of Herefords and advocacy for the breed continues through her many friends impacted by her kindness and her determination to persevere for the betterment of all. **HW**



Bell Ranch was a longtime consignor to the Bulls for the 21st Century Test & Sale in Yerington, Nev. Lilla’s family received the Lucy’s Award, a special presentation in Lilla’s memory, during the March 2021 sale: (l to r) Lilla’s longtime friend and the photographer, Laurie Chabot; grandson Shane Bell; husband Woodie Bell; son John Bell; and Lucy Rechel, test and sale manager.



The Bells: (l to r) Dan, Lilla, Woodie, John and Dean