



# Beneath the Hide

**Ellis Farms may straddle the Illinois-Indiana line,  
but the family's seven-generation commitment to bettering the  
Hereford breed is rooted soundly in real-world data.**

*by Katie Maupin Miller*

If you're fortunate enough to visit Ellis Farms in Chrisman, Ill., you'll probably find yourself seated around Phil and Joyce Ellis' kitchen table. Countless other cattlemen and women over the years sat here, too, some traveling from as far as Finland and South Africa to pull up a chair.

Their children and grandchildren will pop in to visit, reminisce about the family's decades in the business or chat about their plans for the future before heading back out to care for their 200 cows and the family's crops straddling the Indiana-Illinois state line.

Step into the couple's living room or Phil's office to see framed photos of the numerous state and national champions the Ellis family has owned and raised. And, if your visit lasts through lunch

or dinner, the family's greatest contribution to the breed will take center stage on your plate — beef.

## **Always Herefords**

The Ellis family has a long history in the Hereford business. In fact, the couple's commitment to the breed even predates their commitment to each other. Phil's father, Richard, started a registered polled Hereford operation he dubbed R.H. Ellis & Sons in the late 1940s. Some of the first pedigrees of those cattle still hang framed in the Ellis' home today. Joyce is a fifth-generation Hereford breeder. She grew up in Lowell, Ind., on the noteworthy Lanthus Stock Farms, which imported Hereford genetics in 1883 as a wedding gift from Joyce's great-great-grandfather to her great-grandfather, Charlie T. Bailey. Their paths crossed at a cattle show, but Phil had to invite her to

(Photo on opposite page) EFBeef bulls are known for their carcass traits and fertility. With each generation, the family selects cattle that bring the most value to commercial cattlemen. The family's dedication to better beef genetics was recognized twice as the Beef Improvement Federation Seedstock Producer of the Year.

the Huber Ranch, Schneider, Ind., where he worked at the time to see the 1958 national champion bull before Joyce saw his marriage potential during a cowherd tour.

Herefords brought the couple together from the start, and throughout their 60-year marriage, cattle have always been the common ground. Between their families, Phil and Joyce have been a part of nearly 140 years of Hereford genetics. The family has been hosting production sales at their Civil-War era homestead for 73 years. During their time in the industry, Phil and Joyce both served on the American Polled Hereford Association Board of Directors.

Through those years, they have seen cattle change, associations merge, technology advance and markets fluctuate, but their commitment to the breed has never wavered.

Instead, the Ellis family has held fast to the Hereford breed with such grit, determination, integrity and perseverance that the EFBeef prefix carved out a place of distinction among seedstock and commercial cattlemen alike.

### Data-driven

The Ellis family always tried to find ways to improve their stock. In the '90s, Joyce returned home from a polled Hereford board meeting talking about an improved ultrasound technology. She and legendary Hereford herdsman Lilla Bell watched the ultrasound demonstration at the meeting, and Joyce was excited about the opportunity to use it in "Illiana."

In 1971, an ultrasound tech visited Ellis Farms for the first time to collect ribeye area (REA) ultrasound data. Next came comprehensive carcass measurements in the '80s and marbling ultrasounds in the early '90s.

"We've been collecting so much data over the years to use in calculating Hereford Association [expected progeny differences] EPDs that we know what is under the hide of every cow on this place," Phil says.

Revelations about what lay below the hide spurred the Ellis family to delve deeper into measuring and understanding carcass quality. Until

this point, only visual estimates could be used to learn the carcass merit of an animal before it was harvested. With this new tool, the Ellis family could select breeding animals to bolster their offspring's performance for the packers.

During these times, a carcass premium from packers could be a sizable sum of money for a family of five making their living in the cattle business. Although Ellis Farms was known primarily for their seedstock and show cattle at the start of their foray into the ultrasound data domain, the family fed a load of 40 steers each year. By the mid-'80s, the cattle buyers would say the cattle needed another month or two on feed. And, the prices paid for the family's fat cattle left some to be desired.

"There were times when we didn't get any premiums, and rightfully so. So, we decided to find out what we had under our hides, and that necessitated the ultrasound work," says Joyce.

So, armed with new information, the Ellis family started adding ultrasound data to their selection tools, coupling real-world performance with the showing look their cattle were known for at the time.



Phil and Joyce dedicated their lives to the breed. Phil served as an APHA director and Illinois Polled Hereford Association president. He started the annual Illinois Hereford tour in 1965. Joyce was a founding member of the National Polled Herefords, served on the Vision 2000 Committee and was a signee of the breed merger as a APHA director.

### Banners and beef

For those in the industry from the '60s through the mid-'90s, the Ellis name was known ringside for their success. The couple and their three children — Cathy, Matt and Joe — were at the halter of numerous class, division and breed winners at state and national shows alike.

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TF Beau Mode 13A, the 1971 national junior champion bull purchased from Tizhome Farms, was not only one of their first champions on the national stage but also one of the first carcass merit bulls proven by ultrasound technology. The Canadian import produced multiple carcass show champions, including the Kansas City and Denver winners.

Beau Mode would not be the last imported bull to influence the Ellis herd. Phil and Joyce jumped into what some might describe as a puddle jumper with Glen Werry of Glenview Farms.

Together, they flew in that plane with no heater to Canada for the Regina bull sale in the middle of winter. Thankfully, they landed, and as they strolled down the barn aisle, a single bull literally stood out among the resting sale cattle. Right then and there, Phil decided it was the one he wanted. After making an auction alliance with his brother George, the then-manager of Beartooth Ranch, the partners purchased the high-selling bull for \$30,000. In 1974, that bull won the national champion banner, and his semen sales paid for his hefty price tag. His sons would provide the Ellis' first home-raised national champions, including EF Advancement 648J, sire of multiple steer carcass contest winners.

While the family enjoyed decades of showring success, they simultaneously honed their cattle's carcass traits. Within a few years of selections, they were already seeing noticeable differences in the premiums their fed steers garnered on the rail.

The so-called "frame race" brought more growth to the belt-buckle high bulls of the '60s. By the early 1990s, though, packer preferences shifted to cattle of more moderate frame size than what was winning shows. This left the Ellis family at an impasse, as they'd spent two decades balancing showring looks with rail-worthy substance. So, when their home-bred heifer won the 1994 national

champion honors, the family was already leaning in a different direction.

Phil sold that national champion heifer before they left Denver. While it was bittersweet to part with this banner-winning female, the family knew what direction they were heading.

"We had created her using some of our performance-based objectives," says Joe Ellis. "But honestly, we were already on past her the day she was slapped champion."

So, with that last national champion, the Ellis

family stepped out of the middle of the road between commercial performance and showring phenotypes and dove headfirst into catering to the beef business. Grazing the pastures at the time was a young bull, EF F524 Fellis 821C, who would be the number one REA sire in the breed and a leader in percent intramuscular fat (%IMF), when the American Hereford Association released its first carcass sire summary.

### Premium products

Changing paths to focus on real-world carcass traits meant that numbers would be driving the Ellis family's selection criteria now, even if the eye suggested otherwise. Joe recalls a bull they stopped using when the data showed his offspring lacked

in both REA and marbling; yet looking at him, he appeared to be the thickest, heaviest muscled herd sire of the bunch.

With numbers driving the train, some of their most influential sires were not always the most appealing in the showring. The family laughs about arguably one of the most important bulls to their program EF F745 Frank P230. Frank, as they called him, was a straight Prospector/Felton-bred bull that most considered to be too short and too ugly-headed. Yet, to this day, his 13-year-old daughters are still contributing valuable beef-based genetics to the Ellis herd.



Ellis Farms specializes in what Phil calls "sleep-all-night cows." Their females easily calve on their own and their genetics are heavily selected for both calf vigor and mothering ability.

This trend doesn't just apply to sire lines, though. Joe — the family's genetic engineer — recalls the operation's "prime cow." That female had a seemingly unremarkable career as a cow. She wasn't overly eye appealing, her calves weaned at an average size, and there was outwardly nothing special about her. That was until the family compared her calves' carcass data and realized that every calf she produced graded prime, no matter its sire. They flushed their prime cow to capture her carcass genetics.

Her story is just one of many that demonstrates the importance of real-world dollars to the Ellis program. The carcass measurements they have taken on calves they retained ownership on, the sire testing programs they utilize, the ultrasound data collected and the genomic-enhanced EPDs guide their selection and keeps their operation in the green.

"I think one of the most thrilling things that ever happened to me was when we had all of those prime cattle on the first load, and it was like \$200 a head in premiums. Phil said that was better than any purple ribbon," Joyce says.

Although EFBeef cattle are known to be carcass leaders, more than carcass traits drive the ship in Chrisman. The family also puts heavy selection pressure on fertility, calving ease, growth, calf vigor and mothering ability. The result is cattle tailored to the commercial cattlemen — bulls that breed, cows that calve on their own and steers that garner premiums.

With a 400-acre calving pasture seven miles from home, the Ellis family lets what Phil terms their "sleep-all-night cows," simply do their jobs.

Ellis Farms markets more than 30 bulls each year. Currently, the number one marbling bull in the breed and at least half the Top 10 are Ellis-bred or influenced, and the family's outcross carcass genetics are finding use in Hereford herds across the country. Prominent sires such as EFBeef TFL U208 Tested X651 ET, EFBeef BR Validated B413 and



The Ellis family has nearly 140 years of combined history in the Hereford breed. Currently, the seventh generation helps care for the operation's 200 head of cattle grazing on both sides of the Illinois/Indiana state line.



RE Choice Mixer, the champion bull at the 1968 B.O. Gammon Sale (Iowa State Sale), is pictured with the Ellis family and early breed influencers (from left) Orville K. Sweet, executive secretary of APHA; Walter Lewis, judge of Alfalfa Lawn Farms; B.O. Gammon, founder of the Polled Hereford breed; and Joyce and Phil Ellis.

EFBeef Resolute CEO all add value both in terms of carcass traits and real-world production. Perhaps, Phil sums it up the best.

"You want to stay ahead of changes and bring the no-fault kind of cattle that the industry needs," he says.

In Joyce's words, that means one thing — "B.E.E.F!" **HW**