



# Happy Campers

**Hereford cattle serve as an example of the beef industry at the second largest summer camp in Arkansas.**

by *Katie Maupin Miller*

**B**rookhill Ranch and its 520 acres cradled by Ouachita Mountains hosts 3,000 kids from 40 states and 17 countries or territories each year during its summer camp. Mike McMillan, Brookhill Summer Camp COO, likens this piece of Arkansas paradise to an outdoor adventure Disneyland. With more than 20 activities including go carts, archery, sports, horseback riding and even catching a wave on the only wake tower in Arkansas, summer days are full for campers and staff alike. But, in the acres skirting the tennis courts, 25-acre lake and horseback riding trails graze a small, but growing herd of registered Hereford cattle, which play their own role in keeping Brookhill Ranch the picturesque oasis it is today.

## **The beginning of Brookhill**

Brookhill Ranch started as a Hereford operation in 1954 owned by Don and Hettie Lue Brooks. Hettie Lue, Brooks' family matriarch and well-known

youth minister in the Hot Springs, Ark., area, suggested hosting a summer camp just a decade later, according to McMillan.

"She asked her husband, Don, 'Honey, why don't we do something for the kids and have them come to our ranch?'" McMillan says.

So, with just seven campers in 1964, the Brookhill Ranch Summer Camp was born. This year will mark the 58th summer that Brookhill Ranch has welcomed campers. Some of them even represent the fourth generation of Brookhill Ranch participants.

To McMillan, this isn't surprising. Not only does the camp boast endless amenities for campers from the second through ninth grade to enjoy the outdoors, but it also allows young people to just be kids and really play. McMillan knows this firsthand because he was a camper between 1988-1991.

Roots run deep at Brookhill Ranch, and all the summer camp's staff, like McMillan, are required

(Photo on opposite page) IVM Cattle Co., is operated by the Mike and Lynlee McMillan and family. Pictured from left to right: son, Carson; Lynlee; daughter, Campbell; and Mike.

to have personally attended the camp to truly embody the camp's goal of providing children with fun, connection and Jesus.

### Family ties

The Brookhill Ranch staff is like family, but McMillan truly is family. He wed Don and Hettie Lue's eldest granddaughter and Brookhill Ranch Summer Camp executive director, Lynlee Brooks McMillan, in 2004.

McMillan laughs when he recalls writing three goals in his high school yearbook — work for the ambulance service, wed Lynlee Brooks and drive a big Dodge truck. Today, he has checked off all three. Yes, McMillan wasn't originally a rancher or even camp staff; he was an emergency worker who had careers in multiple facets of the first response industry from EMT to dispatcher. Yet, when his father-in-law offered him a role at Brookhill, he took the position with much prayer and contemplation, knowing he had a lot to learn.

"I didn't know anything about the maintenance of a ranch or summer camp. He described the job that I have now, which is handling everything on the operations side," McMillan says. "I'm grateful that I started as a ranch hand and didn't know anything. I had to learn everything firsthand"

For the first year of employment, McMillan called his father-in-law nearly every day as he learned the ins and outs of the family's 520-acre spread. While caring for that much land in any capacity can be challenging, Brookhill Ranch's care and upkeep is even more complex, as the ranch essentially becomes a small town each summer, hosting more than 500 people per week who all need food, water and shelter — not to mention activities. The ranch staff maintains more than 30 structures, four wells and multiple storage tanks for potable water, cares for the 200 acres of land dedicated to the summer camp and its activities and manicures another 300 acres

of agricultural land to ensure the ranch looks pristine for its guests. The latter brought in Brookhill's bald-faced "workers."

### Bald-faced brushhogs

McMillan learned the ropes quickly and served as the main point of contact for all operation projects on the ranch. This meant he and his team cared for the acreage, including the large swath of the ranch that wasn't directly used for the summer camp. Pastures not being used for the summer camp's



Courtesy of Brookhill Ranch Summer Camp

Brookhill Ranch began its family owned and operated summer camp program in 1964 with seven campers. Today, it hosts approximately 3,000 kids from 40 states and 17 countries and territories.



Courtesy of Brookhill Ranch Summer Camp

With more than 20 activities, including go carts, art, archery, sports, horseback riding and more, Brookhill Ranch Summer Camp delights guests.

herd of trail horses or being grazed by his father-in-law's roping cattle were often clipped by staff. This spurred McMillan to start talking to his family about starting his own herd.

In 2015, his father-in-law gifted McMillan a commercial Hereford cow the family named

*continued on page 50...*

Cinnamon. And, Cinnamon renewed Brookhill Ranch's ties to the breed and sparked a passion for McMillan.

"We still have that cow today. She is always tag 1," McMillan says. "She was such a good mama cow that we went and bought a second one."

Always one to dive into a project, McMillan joined the Arkansas Cattlemen's Association and the National Cattlemen's Beef Association (NCBA). He wanted to not only learn how to care for his new wards, but McMillan also wanted to master the lingo and know about the beef industry.

The funds from each calf he sold from his two commercial Hereford cows were placed back into

thinks their striking red-and-white hides add to the already picturesque valley at Brookhill.

"We put the cows into areas not used by the camp, and the cows do their jobs — they turn grass into steak," McMillan laughs.

The inherit carcass quality of the Hereford breed is something McMillan is exploring as he continues to improve and grow his registered herd.

After visiting with Trey Befort, American Hereford Association (AHA) director of commercial programs, at the NCBA Convention, McMillan entered five head into the Hereford Feedout Program. He is looking forward to getting carcass information back on his entries, data he feels is invaluable for his budding cow-calf operation.

### Advocate

While NCBA and AHA have provided McMillan with invaluable resources to learn about the industry and improve his operation, McMillan himself provides a unique platform for beef producers. With Brookhill Ranch Summer Camp, he has an opportunity to show campers, visitors and their families an example of sustainable cow-calf operations and the beef industry. This isn't something McMillan takes lightly, as he recognizes that the summer camp provides him and his family with a distinctive opportunity.

McMillan recently completed the Arkansas Cattlemen's Leadership Course (ACLC) to learn more about how to speak about the beef industry.

"I'm really drawn to the advocacy side and the sustainability side. With this fake news and misinformation, I can help tell my story," he says.

In some ways, McMillan helps tell the story of America's beef producers each time a Brookhill Ranch visitor sees his herd of Hereford cattle grazing on the family's Arkansas acreage. But, McMillan, who wasn't a cattleman or even a camp manager by trade, spends his free time researching the beef industry.

"At the end of the day, I'm just a guy who used to drive ambulances and fire trucks, and today, I'm just a ranch hand," he says. "I love learning. I have cut my teeth on that in this industry, and to have my efforts recognized is just absolutely humbling. I look forward to developing more relationships in the industry."

McMillan also looks forward to his daily trek across the field to check his small herd of Hereford cattle.

"It's a passion," he says. "They're in this beautiful pasture with a creek running through it. They literally bring us joy." **HW**



Mike McMillan purchased his first registered Hereford cow in 2018. Since then, he has used tools provided by the AHA and NCBA to learn about the industry and improve his herd. McMillan currently awaits the carcass results of his first Hereford Feedout Program entries.

his "cow account." Soon, McMillan had enough saved up, and he attended the Magnolia Hereford Association sale to buy his first registered cow in February 2018. You could say this was the official start to IVM Cattle Company — pronounced 4M Cattle Company.

Today, McMillan's 20-head herd is completely registered, with the exception of his two original commercial cows. And, as McMillan jokingly says he is all in — he "drank the Koolaid."

"The difference between the registered and non-registered animals was just night and day when it came to their structure, docility and look," McMillan says.

The Hereford breed has been a perfect fit to serve as Brookhill Ranch's four-legged maintenance crew. They efficiently graze the ranch's acres not used for summer camp activities; yet, the breed is docile enough that no one needs to worry when their pasture is next to areas where the children play. Plus, McMillan