

# Go Ahead and Click

Anyone willing to learn can take high-caliber photos.

by *Wes Ishmael*

**T**aking pictures is easy. Taking pictures that capture the essence of an instant, tell a story and stir emotions — that’s plumb tough.

The latter requires technical proficiency and quick decision making, even in this digital age when newfangled cameras will decide for you, if you let them.

If cattle are involved, then you also need a certain grit.

“I’ve been in the back of feed trucks, on top of bales and roofs,” says Cathy Wright, a classically trained portrait photographer from Gering, Neb. “Whatever it takes to get the shot.”

She’s been bounced from the back of pickups speeding to get into position ahead of cows. She has continued the day’s work with a knee full of thorns, courtesy of paying too much attention to her subject and not enough to prickly pear. So far, though, she’s been able to avoid rattlesnakes.

“It’s just my everyday life, and I’ve had a good time doing it,” Cathy says. “I love where we live and how we live. The Nebraska Sand Hills, they speak to me.”

You can glimpse her photographic mastery in the images that accompany this story. They convey the unteachable aspect that propels proficiency to artistry. It’s the difference between knowing musical notes and how to replicate them, versus playing music.

“Photography is so much about what you give your

“In my experience, for personality and ease of handling it’s just hard to beat a Hereford. Hands-down, they are the most photogenic cattle.”

— Cathy Wright



Cathy Wright, Gering, Neb. Is a classically trained portrait photographer, who taught herself how to capture vivid cattle images.

subject,” Cathy explains. “Almost always, it’s a reflection of the emotion you’re giving the subject. If they’re calm, happy and having a good time without being rushed, almost no matter what, they like the images you take. It’s the same with cattle. You have to give them their time, let them move the way they want to move.”

But let’s not get the loop ahead of the dally.

## Finding her talent

Cathy and her husband, Charles, married while he attended Oklahoma State University in the 1980s. She wasn’t ready to dive into school, so she found a job as the office manager for a local portrait

studio. The owner was a master photographer who shot family pictures, senior photographs, weddings and kids. He didn’t enjoy the kids and soon discovered Cathy had a way with them.

“One day, he decided that I was good with kids, and if he taught me how to use a camera, then he wouldn’t have to do it anymore,” says Cathy with a chuckle.

So, she had the rare opportunity to learn from a master photographer.

"I learned how to use the cameras, the lighting, the dark room," Cathy explains. By the time Charles graduated and they moved, Cathy had her own professional equipment. She did some portrait work on the side but raising their four kids was her central focus.

Ultimately, Cathy did open her own studio, when the kids were older and the family moved to Oshkosh, Neb. She was taking pictures of kids, families, high school seniors and weddings. Then a close friend wanted some help taking cattle pictures.

### Sowing a new chapter

Cathy became quick friends with Cyndi Van Newkirk of Van Newkirk Herefords, soon after moving to Oshkosh. In fact, the pair met virtually via Charles, who moved there about six weeks ahead of his family, so the kids could finish school and Cathy could get their house ready to sell.

While waiting for his family to arrive, Charles attended every school sports game and community



Effectively capturing the essence of an instant is a rare and unique talent.

event available. Cyndi and a friend of hers were at the same events because their kids were participants.

"Charles volunteered me to work at the Van Newkirk bull sale before I ever got here," Cathy says. "I stood in line, handed out dessert and learned what a bull sale was, and Cyndi and I became best friends."

Cathy is a self-described town girl, who was always drawn to animals. Charles was always involved with cattle. Their kids showed 4-H livestock. So, Cathy wasn't a stranger to cattle, but her experience was less than lengthy.

Cyndi enlisted Cathy's help two decades ago to

take pictures as the Van Newkirk ranch crew worked cattle, thinking those images might make their way into the operation's marketing. Cyndi's husband, Joe, was slower to embrace the notion: here's all that needs to be done and someone in the way.

Once Joe saw the first photos, he began warming to the idea. Over time, the stunning images guided the Van Newkirks to see their marketing and advertising in a new light.

"Cyndi is a high-end marketer with the background and experience for it, and I have an aptitude for it," Cathy says. "She knows the market and what the ads need to say. I choose the pictures and design the ads."

Soon, the ranch will self-publish a coffee-table book documenting its 125 years of history, featuring Cathy's photography.

"It has been a lot of fun. The marketing has changed the look of Van Newkirk Herefords in that it put the product in front of people in a different and appealing way. The Sand Hills, the horses and the cattle, there's a certain romance to all of that. When you look at the pictures, it could be today or 100 years ago," Cathy says.

Cathy emphasizes that even the top marketing and photography won't help sell a poor product.

"I was fortunate to get involved with an operation that has an outstanding product. I'm not making the cattle look better than they already are. These animals are beautiful and functional."

Over the years, Cathy photographed cattle of other breeds but says, "Frankly, I am not

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This photo by Cathy Wright received the prestigious honor of hanging in the gallery of the annual Wedding and Portrait Photography International Conference.



Detail, perspective and depth are hallmarks of Cathy Wright photos.

interested in doing any cattle other than Herefords anymore ... I know this is for *Hereford World*, but I really do prefer Hereford cattle. I've nearly been run over a number of times by black bulls. In my experience, for personality and ease of handling it's just hard to beat a Hereford. Hands-down, they are the most photogenic cattle."

Before, Cathy closed her studio, when she and Charles moved to Gering, she used to tease: "I should rename my business to Brides and Bulls or Bulls and Brides, and the bulls are easier."

Cathy continues to photograph weddings for former senior-high picture subjects who ask her to document the next new chapter of their lives. And she still does portrait work for family and friends.

Almost exclusively, though, Hereford cattle are her subject, including pictures benefitting the American Hereford Association and Certified Hereford Beef®.

### Winning with Hereford

In fact, Hereford cattle are the subjects in two of Cathy's pictures that were hung in the prestigious gallery of the annual Wedding and Portrait Photography International Conference. The

competition draws thousands of entries from around the world. Maybe 10-15% of those attain scores high enough to hang in the gallery.

One of the pictures shows a cowboy looking across a valley of Hereford cattle.

The other shows Hereford cows moving down a dirt road at sunrise. Cathy titled it "Women's March."

"Most of the judges thought that was a great play on words, but one judge thought I was mocking the real women's march, and it almost cost me," Cathy says with a laugh.

Cathy has received the honor for other pictures, too.

"I know people who are excellent landscape photographers. If I take landscape pictures, they look boring to me," Cathy says. "I have to have a living subject in my pictures. It's about that living subject and how you relate to it."

Although Cathy admits she had a knack for photography, she says anyone can achieve excellence, if they commit to learning.

"There are lots of people who haven't discovered they have the talent," Cathy believes. "I had a knack for it, but I decided to learn. You can learn whatever you want to learn if you observe and teach yourself how to learn."

Incidentally, chances are you already own a camera capable of recording top-quality images. It is housed in your smartphone.

"They have their limitations, but the high-end ones take great pictures. I occasionally pull mine out," Cathy says. "You have to be close enough to the subject and you need the right kind of light, but the quality of image is quite high."

As with all cameras there's only one way to understand the limitations and opportunities.

"You're always better to take the picture than not. Click the shutter, it's not costing you anything," Cathy says. "The more you click the shutter, the more you learn." **HW**



Feel the bones chill and hear the ground crunch.