

Celebrating History

CK Ranch named the first inductee into the Yards Hall of Fame.

by *Sydney Shive*

Cattle shows in the 1950s were a far cry from today's livestock exhibitions. Ladies donned their full-length fur coats and heels to attend. Waist-high bulls travelled to big cities via railcar.

Through the decades, the National Western Stock Show (NWSS) in Denver, Colo., has been a mainstay. Between its storied past, historic architecture and picturesque Rocky Mountain backdrop, you'd be hard-pressed to find another event like it.

In 2022, the NWSS hosted its first show in its newly rebuilt stockyards. In 2023, a Yards Hall of Fame was founded in conjunction with the Stockyards Beef Festival to celebrate those who have contributed to the history, legacy and story of the NWSS.

"We wanted to take the Yards to the next generation," says Brent Lonker, who spearheaded the event. "We also wanted to honor those that helped build the Yards."

The first-ever inductee into the Yards Hall of Fame is CK Ranch, Brookville, Kan. Owned by the John J. (J.J.) Vanier family, it's hard to name a ranch that's contributed more to the National Western's legacy.

"The efforts that CK has made on behalf of the success of the Yards just goes above and beyond the call of duty," says Jennifer Boka, NWSS director of livestock operations. "They were a great way to start the celebration of honoring someone here."

Hereford roots

In 1933, J.J. Vanier purchased land in Ellsworth County, Kansas, and established ranch headquarters with his wife, Lesta, near Brookville. A few years later, the Vaniers purchased their first Hereford cattle. Shortly



Mary and Marty Vanier traveled to Denver to accept the honor on behalf of CK Ranch and the J.J. Vanier family. Pictured (l to r) are: Mary and Marty Vanier, granddaughters of J.J. Vanier; Amy Cowan, AHA director of youth activities; Brent Lonker, Stockyards Beef Festival planner; and Jack Ward, AHA executive vice president.

thereafter, the family began purchasing entire Hereford herds from across the U.S.

CK Ranch eventually became home to one of the largest registered Hereford herds in the country. Today, CK Ranch is a commercial cow-calf operation managed by J.J.'s grandson, John Vanier.

A rich history

CK Ranch's history with the NWSS began in the 1930s, when J.J. Vanier loaded his Hereford cattle onto a railcar for the first time and sent them west for the stock show. Their purchase of the Troublesome Valley Ranch herd in Kremmling, Colo., resulted in CK Ranch's first-prize carload of bull calves at the 1936 NWSS and the second-prize load of calves at the 1937 NWSS, cementing the ranch's decades-long connection to Denver.

Decades ago, exhibiting at livestock shows was the best way to market your stock.

"Back in those days, we were raising breeding stock and the only way to market those animals was to take them to shows and show them off," says Mary Vanier, J.J.'s granddaughter. "You didn't have internet sales, and you didn't have websites. The shows were the way to market your cattle."



CK Ranch's grand champion carload of bulls at the National Western Stock Show in Denver, Colo.

While CK Ranch attended the stock show to market their livestock, they also attended the NWSS to find the next piece of their herd.

“CK comes to the top of that list of people that had such an enthusiasm for the Yards,” Lonker says. “They really built their whole breeding program around the Yards. It wasn’t just their participation. It was how they found the cattle to buy and build their herd around; it all went back to the Yards.”

It’s almost impossible to think about the National Western without also thinking about the carload show. Between 1951 and 1965, CK Ranch won the carload show eight times. They also garnered multiple reserve champion titles and first-prize carloads.

“There were several decades that we showed extensively at the bigger shows, like Denver and Fort Worth. Back then, a carload was the number of animals you could load into a train boxcar,” Mary says. “There was a rail stop out on the ranch. They would load the cattle up, and a couple of the guys would jump in the boxcar, and off they would go to Denver.”

CK’s success went beyond the Yards. On the Hill in Denver, CK Ranch exhibited the grand champion Hereford bull in 1948 and 1950, and the reserve champion Hereford female in 1951. They also exhibited numerous division champions and class winners.

“In that century, there was a period of dominance,” Lonker says. “Once CK Ranch started to do it, like everything else they did, they were the best at it.”

If you attended the NWSS in 2023, you probably stopped by the Stockyards Event Center to warm up, grab a drink and watch a pen show or attend an event. In the National Western’s earlier days, that wasn’t an option. Some of Mary’s favorite NWSS memories are stories from the 1940s and 1950s that have been passed down from her parents and grandparents.

“They literally would have the show in the Yards. It wasn’t inside; the buildings they tore down recently didn’t exist back then. They showed the cattle out in the stockyards,” Mary says. “It was a huge show that



Brent Lonker presents Mary and Marty Vanier with bronze bulls commemorating the induction of CK Ranch into the Yards Hall of Fame.

would go on for a couple of days. They were long days, and it was cold. The spectators would just sit up on the rails of the fence and watch.

“Back then, ladies didn’t come in their jeans. They didn’t do that back in the ‘40s. You showed up, and you dressed up. Some of those gals would wear full-length fur coats and stand out in the yards all day and watch cattle. It just sounded like a really cool time. It was a lot different then, than what it is now.”

Industry leaders

Like CK Ranch, Vanier family members are trailblazers in their own right. They’re dedicated philanthropists and leaders for their community, church and the Hereford breed.

“Their leadership went beyond the stock show,” Lonker says. “It was an industry contribution.”

J.J. Vanier and his son, Jack, are both former



CK Ranch won the National Western Stock Show Hereford Carload championship eight times between 1951 and 1965. Pictured (l to r) are: Jack Vanier, George Wilson, CK Ranch herdsman, and Donna Vanier, accepting one of those awards.

presidents of the American Hereford Association Board of Directors. Jack’s wife, Donna, helped found the Hereford Auxiliary (now known as the National Hereford Women) in 1967 and served as president. The Vanier family works closely with the Hereford Youth Foundation of America and provides scholarships for National Junior Hereford Association members.

“Donna Vanier was in the group that started the Herford Auxiliary,” Lonker says. “Several leadership positions like that which have endured, and they were there for the creation or at the top of it.”

Almost 100 years ago, CK Ranch packed their first load of cattle into a boxcar and headed west to Denver. While most things have changed since then, the Vanier family continues to propel the livestock industry forward. As the first inductee into the NWSS Yards Hall of Fame, they continue to set a precedent for years to come.

“We are honored that CK was recognized in this way,” Mary says. “Our parents and grandparents loved the NWSS and would be thrilled to see that the show is not only investing in its future, but also honoring its past.” **HW**

Editor’s note: Jack Vanier passed away Feb. 10; see page 102.