

# Herefords on Display

From railcars to pickup trucks and two-man crews to twelve-man crews, livestock shows have changed over the years.

by *Sydnee Shive*

In the 1950s, a two-man crew and a load of short-statured, curly-haired Hereford cattle, traveled to shows by rail. They had been on the road for a couple of months. The men rested above the cattle in sleeping bags while the cattle dozed in the boxcar below. Meals were a dollar, maybe two.

Livestock shows are a gathering place, a singular location for spectators to peruse hundreds of cattle. Stockmen and women stand ringside, appraising the entries, asking questions and searching for their next herd sire or foundation female.

## Railcar roots

Hereford's American roots trace back to 1817 — when the breed first arrived in the states. U.S. livestock exhibitions began almost 80 years later

with the 1896 Southwestern Exposition and Livestock Show (now the Fort Worth Stock Show) in Fort Worth, Texas. The goal: encourage interest in exhibitor cattle.

The turn of the 20th century marked the inaugural exhibitions of several long-running and prestigious livestock shows. The American Royal's first show took place in 1899 as the National Hereford Show. The National Western Stock Show (NWSS) was founded in 1906. The Chicago International Livestock Show's first exhibition was in 1900, the last in 1975 when it was replaced with the North American Livestock Exhibition in Louisville, Ky. For decades, livestock shows connected potential buyers with Hereford breeders.

“We went to shows to advertise our product,” says Odell Gelvin, retired Ogeechee Farms manager. Gelvin has spent a lifetime working in the Hereford breed; he took his first show herd on the road in 1951. “People would come to our sales from a far distance. If you had a winning show herd, you had a good herd bull.”

The shows of yesteryear looked different than today's shows. Many cattle arrived via railcar to important stockyards that served as marketing meccas for stockmen.

“We fixed these boxcars up pretty comfortable,” Gelvin says. “We built decks on each end. We had



The 1963 National Western Stock Show champion Hereford female, NP Miss Domino 227, exhibited by Northern Pump Farms. Pictured (l to r) are: Wad Hinman and Harry Parker, judges; Bill Adams, American Hereford Association; Brad Scott, Northern Pump manager; and Odell Gelvin, Northern Pump herdsman.

## Behind the Bronze

It's a time-honored tradition — win a national Hereford show, bring home a bronze bull or cow.

"I remember when we won our first one," says Melissa Grimmel Schaake, owner of Grimmel Schaake Cattle Company. "It's like winning the Lombardi Trophy. Yes, it's just a trophy, but it's a symbol of blood, sweat and tears. You feel as if you've made it when you win one of them. Every now and then, I read the plaques on the trophies and think about what those cow families are now doing for us."

Reserved for national champions, show bulls and females of the year, retiring American Hereford Association and National Junior Hereford Association (NJHA) board members, honorary NJHA members and Golden Bull Achievement Award winners, the bronze cattle grace the shelves of the Hereford breed's best.

The model cattle date back to 1969. The bronze trophies are based on depictions of the ideal Hereford bull and Hereford cow, unveiled at the 1969 Hereford Type Conference in Madison, Wis. Artist Tom Phillips developed the drawings, utilizing suggestions from 200 Hereford breeders.

"No two cattlemen will agree on all points in an ideal [cow], but you can tell this cow is a cow when compared to the 'ideal' bull," said Dr. C.E. Lindley, Mississippi State University dean of agriculture, in a breeding herd panel at the 1969 Hereford Type Conference. "She shows functional efficiency and is structurally sound, which makes for productive longevity."

It wasn't until the 1970s that the bronze trophies became a Hereford staple.



The bronze statues are manufactured by R.S. Owens — a custom award company, which also makes the Golden Globe, Emmy statuette and Oscar. The original mold belongs to R.S. Owens, now under the umbrella of the St. Regis Group.

"They are unique, and we're very proud of them," says Mark Psaros, senior vice president of operations, St. Regis Group. "They are a custom process, which has been in our manufacturing facility for a very long time. We rank it up there with the Emmys and the Golden Globes and things like that, that we make. It's a very prestigious award."

The original mold was handmade by the company's artists more than 40 years ago. The cattle are cast in three parts, starting with

the head and ending with the tail.

"They are really, really traditional in terms of hand-manufacturing," says Psaros. "They're cast by hand and finished by hand. There's a lot of skill that's gone into maintaining the tradition over 40 years."

There's no doubt placing a bronze Hereford bull or cow on the mantle is a special feeling. Generations of Hereford breeders across the country have brought home the trophies. No matter how the statues are displayed, they will always be keepsakes, heirlooms, prized possessions and symbols of success.

"It makes you reflect on all the breeders that have come before you. It really makes you think about the heritage of the Hereford breed, too, because it's a traditional looking trophy," says Grimmel Schaake. "It's not modern, which I love. It makes you reflect." **HW**

sleeping bags, we had a gas burning stove, and we had 12-volt lights we burned off batteries. We slept above our cattle. On the other end, we had a deck that carried our water, feed and equipment that we needed at these shows. The cattle could just ride along and sleep in the boxcars."

The show day crew and preparation looked a little different, too. Cattle didn't show with manicured tailheads or legs fit with adhesive.

"We called it grooming, and it's nothing like what they do today," Gelvin says. "But we would soak their legs and draw the hair up on their legs to make it look like they had a lot of bone. We could cover them up with a good coat

of hair, and we curled it in the summertime. With short hair, we'd curl it real close and pull the hair up. As it got cooler, we'd grow more hair, and we were able to hide more faults. We'd get the cattle ready; we'd oil them and make their coat shiny and give them to the manager to present them. Most of the time we would have 10 to 12 head between the two of us."

Like most other aspects of life over the past 60 years, the cattle have also changed.

"The cattle back in our day were a lot shorter-legged, a lot blockier, and we got them a lot fatter than we do today," Gelvin says.

*continued on page 58...*

...Herefords on Display continued from page 57

Like today, livestock shows stood as a forum for breed enthusiasts to evaluate the latest genetics, cuss and discuss current trends and select the type of cattle they believe could improve their own herds. Before AI, embryo transfer and in vitro fertilization became more commonplace in the



Odell Gelvin managed the show herd for Northern Pump Farms, McHenry, Ill., in the 1950s and 1960s. Traveling the country via railcar, few herds were more competitive at national shows.

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— Odell Gelvin, retired  
Ogeechee Farms manager

beef industry, cattle shows also served as a likely place to select a sire or dam, which could move your operation forward. And, before four-color advertisements became more affordable, shows were the only way to see Hereford cattle in color.

“We’re talking about dates that were almost prior to EPDs (expected progeny differences),” says Tommy Coley, former Perks Ranch manager and current American Hereford Association Eastern region field representative. “We didn’t have many other objective judgments of cattle other than visual appraisal.”

### Trailers today

Many aspects of livestock exhibitions have changed over the past 100, 50 and even 25 years. Cattle now arrive in stock trailers rather than in railcars. It’s common to pack the family into the pickup and travel to a show for the weekend. In the 1940s and 1950s, traveling to a show took much longer — the trips involved fewer people and more cattle.

“In those days, we would spend seven to 10 days at livestock shows,” Gelvin says. “We didn’t go for three or four days. There would be only two of us; we had no extra help. The managers would generally come in and show the cattle on show day.”

Some of Gelvin’s trips ran from August to December as he crossed the country with 10 to 12 head of Hereford cattle. Traveling with a nurse cow was also a common practice.

“The longest ride we went on was from Potosi, Mo., to Phoenix, Ariz. I’ll tell you, it was a far piece across Texas,” Gelvin says. “We went to El Paso, up into Arizona and then we went to Denver. Then we came home.”

Small stall crews have been replaced with a dozen people on hand to help fit and prep cattle for show day. Yet, some things remain the same, such as the importance of making connections, friends and memories.

“There was a lot of camaraderie when we were on the road in those days,” Gelvin says. “I just loved it. I really loved it.”

For some of today’s strictly commercial-centric Hereford producers, attending shows doesn’t expand, reach or impact their customer base as it did in the years of rail carloads of cattle. But, for other purebred producers, shows still play an important role in building their brands and marketing their genetics.

“I think it all comes down to an operation’s goals and where their customers are,” says Melissa Grimmel Schaake, owner of Grimmel Schaake Cattle Company. “For us, exhibiting at shows helps us gain interest in our females.”

Word-of-mouth, friendships and networking still play an integral role in creating interest from buyers — no matter the potential customer.

“I feel as if it helps build credibility, putting your cattle at the forefront,” says Grimmel Schaake. “I’m also a firm believer that business and friendships go hand-in-hand. When you’re at an event or a show, you’re able to have those



conversations and build relationships with current customers and new and future ones as well.”

Many Hereford breeders still market their sale cattle at shows and use print advertisements. Most operations also get some help from social media and other digital outlets, but there’s nothing like seeing the livestock in person.

“I think putting your cattle in front of others is huge,” says Grimmel Schaake. “People are able to see a lot more than what a picture or video has to offer, and they’re able to learn more about your genetics and what they produce.”

### Recent success

For more than 100 years, shows and sales have been a gathering place for Hereford breeders and buyers. The cattle have changed, the people have changed — but Herefords still maintain success.

In the last few years, Herefords topped sales and shows around the country. Herefords grabbed supreme banners during the inaugural Cattlemen’s Congress to make history in Oklahoma City. Bald-faced bulls claimed supreme titles at multiple state fairs, including Wyoming and Indiana. Herefords won supreme female and bull titles at the Arizona National Livestock Show. The supreme bull, a Hereford, topped the Red Bluff Bull & Gelding Sale — selling for \$25,000. F1 baldies even had the highest averages at the NWSS’s first-ever commercial female sale.

“A livestock show is essentially where Hereford enthusiasts from all over come to one location, in one place,” Grimmel Schaake says. “Using the opportunity to our

advantage, showcasing our genetics, having those conversations and forming those relationships is second to none at those events.”

The world has changed over the years. But spectators are still gathered ringside at national shows, appraising cattle, asking questions, buzzing with excitement and trying to find their next herd sire or donor cow. **HW**

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Melissa Grimmel Schaake and her 2016 National Western Stock Show polled champion Hereford, LCC TG Be My Merry Time 7B. Hereford cattle have changed since the 1960s, but the value cattle shows provide to connect with potential customers is strong as ever.



The polled Hereford yearling bull champion drive at the 2023 Cattlemen’s Congress in Oklahoma City, Okla. Breeders ringside evaluated the cattle, along with judge Jason Hoffman.