

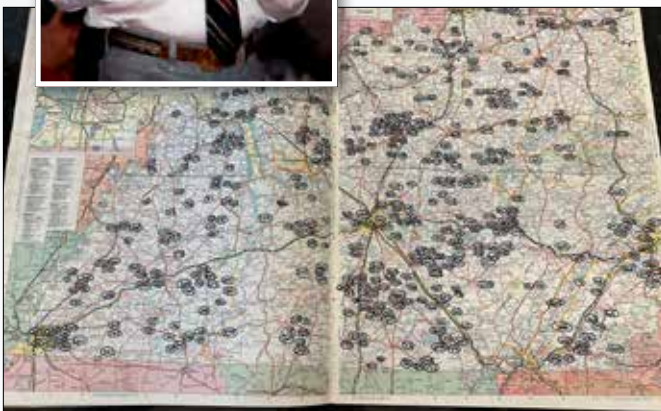
Pages of History

Marketing Hereford genetics has changed over the years, but the integrity backing the breed stands as steady as the century-old Herd Bull issue.

by *Katie Maupin Miller*

For a century, cattlemen and women have thumbed through the Hereford Association's Herd Bull and Reference Editions — maybe they dog-eared the page with their favorite sire, called a breeder to enquire about new bald-faced genetics or noted an upcoming show or sale date on their calendar. The Herd Bull Issue — always the largest and most referenced issue each year — continues to stand the test of time as the Association's flagship publication, even as the ways Hereford breeders market their cattle continue to evolve.

Like the crew producing each Herd Bull issue, a particular group of often behind-the-scenes cattle marketers — auctioneers, sales managers, photographers, fitters and field representatives — continue to work tirelessly to drive the demand for Hereford cattle. This is their story. Tales from life on the road, the view from behind the block and the ever-changing ways Hereford breeders present their genetics to the public, all rooted in the enduring tradition of red-white-faced cattle.



When Gary Nichols joined the APHA as a fieldman in 1977, his Rand McNally Atlas was his traveling companion and navigator for more than 250 days each year. He traveled to attend Hereford shows, sales and events and visit breeders in his territory.

On the road

In 1977, when Gary Nichols entered the American Polled Hereford Association's (APHA) office in Kansas City, Mo., for field representative training, he was met by a Rand McNally Atlas. The collection of road maps for the contiguous United States was plunked on his desk along with a list of every polled Hereford breeder in his territory. His first official task was to circle every breeder's town and note their name and number.

Today, such a task seems unfathomable. Many young people don't have to recognize points on a map outside of geography class, as the GPS in their smartphones helps them get place-to-place. Before you could buy a GPS navigator for your vehicle, type your location into a smartphone or even print directions from MapQuest, it was just you, the road and a Rand McNally Atlas. And Nichols was on the road more than 250 days a year.

Modern technology certainly helps today's field staff communicate with more ease. Before the ubiquitous smartphone and GPS, field representatives would painstakingly plan efficient routes through their territory — mapping ways to visit several nearby breeders in a day, as they do now. Back in the day, though, scheduling these visits meant a call to the breeder's home landline phone, often from a hotel. Any change of plans needing to be communicated on the fly meant dropping change into a payphone along the road.

"I remember working Herd Bull Book and traveling. You would try to get as many stops as you could during the day," says past APHA fieldman and retired auctioneer Jim Birdwell. "You would stop at a payphone and call them back, and

“If we're all standing in the bull pen, we're all standing in the same level of muck ... Bull pens are the great leveler.”

— Gary Nichols

if you couldn't get in touch with them, you'd have to jump in your car and just keep running."

This meant payphones were almost as well mapped in a fieldman's respective territory as the Association's members.

Birdwell also recalls sitting with breeders at a kitchen table and sketching the layout for their Herd Bull issue ad by hand before passing it on to the magazine staff.

Despite technological advancements enabling fieldmen to change how they do their jobs, the role they play within the Association remains largely the same. Field representatives attend Hereford sales and events, forge industry-wide relationships, help breeders add value to their Hereford genetics and promote marketing opportunities, such as selling advertisements for this very issue.

Calling bids

Another aspect of being a fieldman is often serving as a ringman at Hereford sales. Calling bids and calling potential buyers looking for a particular bull or female to add to their operation is often all in a day's work. Unsurprisingly, this sale savviness led to many previous APHA and American Hereford Association (AHA) fieldmen entering the auction business. Gentlemen like Eddie Sims cut a large swath through the sale circuit.

Sims served as an APHA fieldman before he started National Cattle Services Inc. (NCS) in 1968. Sims not only sold Hereford cattle in nearly every state and several Canadian provinces, but NCS often served as the first stop for many other influential marketers along the way, such as Birdwell and Don Birk.

Like Sims, Birdwell started as an APHA fieldman and eventually opened his own auction business in 1978. Both men note that the dynamics of live sales haven't changed much over the years. Maintaining a quick, confident pace and good momentum is paramount.

One change to the art of auctioneering is the growing popularity of online bidding, which allows buyers to bid from their couches rather than sales bleachers. While online bidding is convenient, it has also been sale-saving for breeders whose sales landed during bad winter weather or even the pandemic.

“In 2001, I was still buying film. The next year, I went digital.”

— Don Birk

photography skills picturing cattle for NCS clients. In 1982, he stepped to the helm of his own company, Don Birk Enterprises, and Birk has been behind the camera picturing cattle ever since.

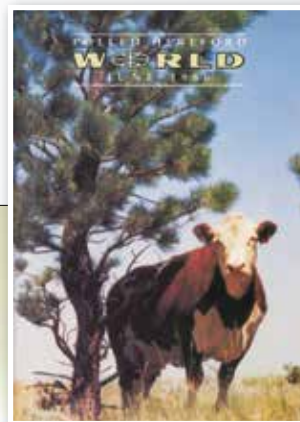
In the last 40 years, Birk has seen styles shift and change in the cattle, grooming and showing. From small to tall, to taller and back to

“The internet has been a valuable service to those folks. It has kept them from canceling their sales sometimes,” Sims says. “The internet platform has been a big asset to the industry.”

With some buying cattle sight unseen with a click, good photos and videos become even more important.

Picture perfect

Birk, a previous *Drovers* fieldman and another Eddie Sims alum, honed his



Don Birk has been either behind the camera or beside a sale ring helping market cattle since he started Don Birk enterprises in 1982. He has taken countless photos of influential Hereford sires and dams, and snapped this memorable 1986 *Polled Hereford World* cover at Beartooth Ranch.

more moderate, Birk has shot them all. Unlike today's digital cameras, which give photographers instant feedback in the form of a photo preview on the camera's screen, Birk originally shot on film. This meant that he didn't truly know if a shot had turned out until it was taken to a photo lab to be processed, developed and printed.

Because the stakes were so high when shooting with film, Birk often only shot one or two head of cattle per roll in case that roll would be improperly exposed or damaged. He also practiced his art so much that he could tell by the sound of the shutter click if his shot would include a calf's ear flick.

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The other challenge with film photography was that the photos needed to be developed and printed before they could be used in ads, sale books or displays. Photographers each had their preferred photo lab, which developed and printed the photos in a way that best accentuated the colors and shades of their subjects. For Birk, it was a lab in Springfield, Mo. He and a racecar photographer were the largest and most loyal clients. As Birk will tell you, though, every photographer had backup photo labs around the country in case they needed to get the photos printed and posted on the road to meet fast-approaching print deadlines.

Photographers weren't the only marketers saddled with the limits of film photography — fieldmen and sale managers also waded through these challenges. Birdwell recalls taking herd sire shots on a Kodak Brownie Instamatic, a pint-sized film camera. He says, in years past, not every photo used in advertising was cover-worthy — some were just photos. But, today, with the added importance of online buyers, sale cattle, herd sire and foundation female photos need to be professional.

“Now, if you don't have good pictures, you might as well not run it,” Birdwell says.

Birk still recalls the switch to digital.

“One day, the guy who owned the color lab said, ‘Walgreens and Walmart are putting us out

of business. It's time to go digital.’ This is around 2000. I spent about a year practicing,” he recalls.

“I was on my way to Springfield to go to Genex Bull stud, and I stopped at Walmart to buy film on 9/11. In 2001, I was still buying film. The next year, I went digital.”

There were challenges when he first switched to digital, though. Home computers and the internet weren't as fast. Uploading large, high-quality photos could be taxing, and at times, he even had to mail the photos to advertisers on disks.

Today, submitting photos for ads, print materials, sale books, etc., is much easier. With quick rural internet, submitting photos can be done with a click. And often, more photos per sale are used, as even lots not pictured in the print pieces can be featured online.

“When I first started, you'd have a sale, and you would do 10 and no more than 20 head. And you would run the best. Even putting color pictures in catalogs was expensive because they would charge you a color fee for the four-color separation,” Birk says.

Videos of sale lots were also added to the image offering, and potential buyers can now peruse sale cattle by scrolling through their smartphones.

Data added

Going digital didn't only affect photography; the prevalence of home computers and decent internet connections changed the way Hereford breeders kept records, shopped for genetics and



Eddie Sims started National Cattle Services Inc. (NCS) in 1968 after serving as an APHA fieldman. Before his retirement, Sims sold cattle in nearly every state and several Canadian provinces. Hereford cattle are a family tradition in the Sims family, and nearly all of the Sims family, except the babies born after 2020 and Catie's husband, are pictured with this 2010 JNHE champion.

“After you have your sale, you need to go to work on the next one. It is a 365-day-a-year project.”

— Eddie Sims

found industry information. Larger, faster, more-capable computers also spawned breed expected progeny differences (EPDs). With technology finally being able to archive enough information about pedigrees, performance and progeny, EPDs were born when the computers were able to run the complex predictive algorithms.

Nichols still remembers the large room at APHA dedicated to housing the technology to do so.

“I remember when EPDs came into existence,” Nichols says. “There was a big room filled with a computer, and it was kept as cool as a meat locker. There were only a few computers in the country that had the ability to handle the raw material needed to calculate EPDs, and Brett Middleton (APHA staff member) would go into that room to figure out a problem, and you wouldn't see him around the office for three or four days until he got it figured out.”



With the rise of EPDs and eventually genomic-enhanced EPDs, buyers added another level of criteria when selecting sale cattle. Before the prevalence of such data, Hereford cattle were selected solely on phenotype, which heralded a certain brand of stockmanship and keen eyes. But the marriage of such stockmanship and science-backed predictive performance data has enabled the breed to improve cattle at a breakneck speed.

“When I first started out, it was all pedigree and reputation of the owner. That is still important, but you’re adding to it,” Birdwell says. “I don’t know if anybody would buy a herd bull without knowing his current EPDs and that all the genetic tests were done.”

As a Hereford breeder, Birdwell appreciates using this information to make breeding decisions on his operation, Birdwell Ranch.

“As a breeder, you can pull up breeding and performance information at your fingertips. I think maybe people’s knowledge about how computers can work in the beef cattle business has changed the market tremendously. It is easier to make matings; you can run those numbers,” he says. “Before, if you wanted to change your frame score, you just bought the biggest bull. Today, you find out what that bull’s progeny will look like in your cow herd.”

Everlasting integrity

Amid all the industry shifts and changes, one thing has remained steadfast when it comes to marketing Hereford cattle — integrity. All agree that integrity is imperative to the success of any cattle operation, or as Birdwell and Sims both say: just use the golden rule and treat people the way you want to be treated.

“Your reputation is hard to build but really easy to destroy,” Birdwell reminds.

And in a fast-moving world full of options for shortcuts, Sims recommends staying on the true path.

“People don’t like phony stuff — period. You just have to get back to the basics,” he says. “Integrity has a whole lot to do with it. If people are honest and the public sees it, they are going to at least come and bid.”

Birdwell also notes the power of patience when building a Hereford operation.

“It’s important to do your own thing. You need to have your own program,” he says.

Birdwell adds one of the biggest mistakes he saw new breeders make was simply rushing too quickly to have their first production sale.



Changes in technology and marketing purebred cattle evolved Jim Birdwell’s businesses over the years, whether he was behind the block serving as an auctioneer or in the bull pen selecting future herd sires. But, integrity remained constant both on Birdwell Ranch and in his auctioneering career.

And when you’ve had your sale, Sims reminds you the job isn’t finished.

“After you have your sale, you need to go to work on the next one. It is a 365-day-a-year project,” he says. “Follow up, call your customers, see how your cattle are doing for them and let them know when your next sale is. If they have any problems with them, fix them for them. Repeat customers build your business. They may not need a bull every year, but they may need a bull every two years.”

— Jim Birdwell

When Nichols recalls his years traveling as a fieldman he laughs, saying he didn’t get rich, but it was one of the most enriching experiences in his life. Integrity is essential he says. No matter how many cows you have, how much land you own, what your bank account balance is or how long you’ve been in the business, he explains, selecting and selling cattle serves as a great equalizer.

“The interesting thing to me is if we’re all standing in the bull pen, we’re all standing in the same level of muck,” Nichols says. “Whether you make \$20,000 a year or \$20 million a year, you all are at the same level. Bull pens are the great leveler.” **HW**

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