



# Commercial Always

**Bill Goehring, retiring AHA president, is proud of the breed's progress and opportunity.**

by *Wes Ishmael*

Spend a little time around Bill Goehring, retiring president of the American Hereford Association (AHA) and you quickly understand he's as affable as they come but also on a mission. He doesn't waste many words or much motion without a purpose. Part of that likely stems from the number of proverbial irons he and his family have in the fire.

There's Goehring Herefords, a registered herd that began in 1973 — Bill had his first Hereford heifer when he was 9 years old. But you need to back into that fact to understand who he is and where he comes from. There are also the commercial cows, commercial heifer development, a backgrounding operation, cattle feeding and a sale barn.

"The market is the centerpiece of our business. We're one of the few markets in the country that sells all classes of livestock on the same day, plus hay and outside items," Bill explains. He's talking about Keosauqua Sales Co. Inc. (KSC) in Keosauqua, Iowa. The town is on the big bend of the Des Moines River in southeastern Iowa.

## **Sales every Saturday**

KSC averages about 300 hogs each Saturday, plus 600 sheep and goats and 1,000 head of cattle. The day this author was there, 1,400 cattle went through the ring. There's an assortment of hay each



Bill Goehring encourages everyone to keep improving and further fuel the opportunity to expand the breed's footprint.

week, big round bales to small square ones. As for the outside items, it's anything from fence posts and farm equipment to deer blinds.

Arrive after the first gavel drops sale day and you'll be walking a ways up a dirt road leading to the barn. That's a far cry from what KSC was when Bill's dad, Gary, purchased it in 1986.

"It was pretty small and rundown and didn't have a very big customer base," Bill remembers. "Dad focused on building the pig sale first because it took less capital, there was less competition from other auction markets and to build relationships. There were all kinds of hut pigs and pasture pigs, and we'd pasture trade to get them to come to the market."

KSC went from averaging 50-100 pigs per week to averaging 1,500 in two years. Before the independent hog business declined, about 2,000 pigs went through the ring every week.

"When the pig deal tipped over and the hog business transitioned into a more vertical, consolidated business, there weren't as many pigs trading," Bill explains. "I went to buying load lots of cattle out in the country, 750-800 pound heifers from backgrounders who weren't coming to the sale." From 2005 to 2015 he was marketing about as many cattle via country trade as through the sale barn.

As Bill developed relationships with his country clients, cattle auction volume increased.

They learned the cattle would net more dollars selling at auction.

Fewer pigs selling through the market also affected order buyers, who asked Bill to start buying cattle for them. Some of his top cattle buying customers today stem from the hog marketing relationships.

“When Becky and I bought out the rest of the market from my dad (2008), my number one goal was to get more competition for market (packer) cows and bulls,” Bill explains. At the time, one or two buyers aligned with packers ruled the roost and dampened competition. Bill developed a relationship and standing order with another packer and began buying and competing for the packer cows and bulls. Ultimately, the competition he fostered brought more buyers and more packer cattle for them to buy. These days, it’s common for there to be as many as seven packer buyers at each sale, bidding on 200 head or so. The market at KSC is the highest of any in a broad area.

“I get cows from 80 to 100 miles away from sellers who will pass two or three others markets to come here,” Bill says. “I don’t want to be second. I want to be even or ahead of them.” It’s easy to imagine he and competition becoming fast friends early in life.

Before his dad bought the sale barn, he and Bill managed farm sales in the area. Gary would serve as auctioneer, ultimately attending Missouri Auction School and becoming the main auctioneer at KSC. Between his sophomore and junior year at Iowa State University, Bill went to the World Wide College of Auctioneering at Mason City, Iowa.

Early on, Bill was the KSC feeder pig auctioneer. As the barn’s cattle auctioneers retired, Bill took on the role and has been auctioneering the cattle every week for 25 years.

When he’s not on the block sale day, you’re likely to find him auctioning hay outside to a gaggle of buyers following him from lot to lot, helping maintain the ring or sitting in the seats buying weigh-cows.

The entire Goehring family is involved in KSC. Literally speaking, Bill and Becky’s four boys — Curt, Luke, Ted and Colby — grew up at the livestock market. The boys’ spouses are now part of the team. Bill emphasizes Becky is the glue that ties it all together. In fact, Bill first met Becky when she was working in the sale barn cafe.

### **Growing and developing**

Starting with Bill’s dad, the Goehrings have always backgrounded cattle. “We would buy heifers, develop them and then market them as yearlings weighing 750-800 pounds,” Bill explains. They background their steers to about 900 pounds.

Several years ago, the Goehrings began handling sales for Big Bend Ranch, a local commercial heifer

development operation. Ultimately, the owner went out of business and the Goehrings purchased the property and continued developing and marketing commercial heifers, maintaining the same operation name until transitioning to 5G Cattle Co.

The Goehrings buy about 800 commercial black and black baldy heifers every year and also develop some of their own. Of those, they breed the top 600 or so heifers and offer them the first Wednesday every December. The heifers are AI-bred, ultra-sounded and grouped by calf sex.

### **Now to the Herefords**

Goehring Herefords is located near Libertyville, about 20 miles north of Keosauqua.

When you understand the family’s commercial roots and ongoing involvement, you understand the genetic direction of their registered program. Big, growthy, good-footed, functionally sound cattle.



Keosauqua Sales Co. Inc. — owned and managed by the Goehring family nearly 40 years — is the centerpiece of a broad operation that includes backgrounding, commercial heifer development and a registered Hereford herd.

Until his time spent on the Board, though, Bill explains he believed Angus could provide all of the marbling needed in an F1 black baldy.

“We changed our breeding program to find some higher marbling bulls so our customers can produce a higher percentage of Prime grading carcasses than in the past,” Bill says. “The whole gamut of Hereford genetics is better today, and we can find bulls with marbling, growth, good feet and quality.”

When Bill’s dad bought the sale barn, they had about 50 registered Hereford cows. Last year, Goehring Herefords sold 80 yearling and two year-old bulls. They also lease out 25-30 bulls every year. The Goehrings have a spring herd and a fall herd.

“The sale opened a lot of doors to me for marketing our Herefords. Even when you couldn’t hardly sell a bull, I could sell them around here,” Bill says. Keep in mind, when calves and feeder cattle come through the ring sired by Goehring bulls, he’s not too bashful to let the buyers know.

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The Goehring family also developed a market for registered Hereford cows and heifers to breeders and juniors in about a 200-mile radius. However, 15-20% go to commercial herds. Along with private treaty, they market some in the previously mentioned December sale.

### Investing in leadership

Bill is one of those people who tends to end up in leadership positions, be it Block and Bridle back in college, the Livestock Marketing Association or his state breed association. He was on the board of the Iowa Junior Polled Hereford Association — his parents, Mary and Gary, were junior advisors during much of his junior career. He served on the board of the National Junior Polled Hereford Council.

When asked to run for the AHA Board, Bill was just coming off his term as president of the Iowa Hereford Breeders Association.

“My first thought was ‘I’m too busy,’” Bill says. “But I believed I could take something to the national Board and move the thinking more to the commercial side of the business. With my commercial experiences, I thought maybe I could share some insights about what Hereford could do to further improve. Before I got on the Board, not a lot of people, nationally, knew who I was.”

Among highlights during his time on the Board, Bill points to being part of the in-depth process resulting in the breed’s newest *Strategic Plan*. Another is the breed’s collaborative research project with Colorado State University and AgNext.

“I never would have dreamed that we would be doing research about sustainability,” Bill says. “I do believe from the meetings we’ve been in, and the market studies we’ve seen that it has an opportunity to become a unique and dynamic part of the market. If we want to be in the market and be competitive, we have to be willing to move where the market wants to go.”

He’s proud of the additional data being reaped by growing participation in the Hereford Feedout Program and the increasing value of Hereford-influenced feeder cattle and replacement females.

“We have increased the value of Hereford-sired calves across the country. Relative to commodity beef cattle, the values are higher than they were five years ago. There are more Hereford-influenced sales and more baldy replacement sales than five years ago,” Bill explains. “I think the competition looks at Hereford differently today than they did five years ago. We have bent the needle and the competition sees Hereford as a threat to bull demand.”

Bill also points to development of the Hereford Seedstock Academy and obtaining a cost reduction in DNA testing for breeders.

He sees lots more opportunity for the breed ahead.

“The national cow herd doesn’t have much Hereford in it, and we can change that,” Bill says. “The opportunity is for Hereford bulls on black cows: heterosis, added efficiency and sustainability, it all comes together.”

He emphasizes taking advantage of the opportunity requires continuous commitment by everyone involved.

“The opportunity is so bright right now to embrace more business. Make another commercial contact, visit another local market, utilize the resources that are available through the Association,” Bill says. “Step in the water. It’s not all on Kansas City to promote the cattle. Some of us need to take it further. Embrace the guy at the local co-op meeting, go to video sales and meet the marketing representatives. Go meet with a feedyard guy and ask what we need to do to sell him more cattle. Don’t just sit home and whine about what you see as a problem. Do something about it.” **HW**

The whole Goehring family is involved in the multi-faceted operation. (Front row left to right): Layne, Lucy and Hattie. (Back row left to right): Lauren and Curtis (holding Maverick), Lucas and Cody, Becky and Bill, Hannah Heiserman and Colby, Ted (holding Ellie) and Rachele (holding Clara).

