

From Wedding Bells to Bulls

Johnson Hereford Farms celebrates more than 100 years in the Hereford breed.

by *Sydnee Shive*

More than a century ago, E.O. and Esther Johnson married and received three wedding gifts from their parents: a Singer® sewing machine, along with a Hereford bull and Hereford cow. The foundation for Johnson Hereford Farms was laid.

A year later, in 1918, E.O. bought 10 head of Hereford cows and one bull. He walked them 30 miles from Sioux Rapids, Iowa, to his land just south of Milford, Iowa.

In 2024, with E.O.'s grandson, Jack, and his wife, Lynne, at the helm, Johnson Hereford Farms celebrated its 106th year — and received official century breeder status from the American Hereford Association (AHA) in 2023.

Establishing the herd

E.O. continued to build his herd — purchasing cattle from other Iowa Hereford breeders, including Wiese & Sons in Manning, Iowa. Eventually, the family started exhibiting at shows, including the Clay County Fair, in the 1930s.

“Back then, my dad was showing 4-H stuff. And the Clay County Fair was just growing,” Jack says. “In the '30s, when they had the herd going for about 10 years, Dad won the Clay County Fair grand champion steer four years in a row. That kind of got people interested in our cattle.”

While they were showing, they were also consigning cattle to sales.

E.O. was an astute stockman and had a certain, special talent for people and livestock. Along with his Hereford cattle, E.O. loved horses and would break them for locals. He lived by the philosophy that a bull was more than just half your herd.

E.O.'s passion for livestock was passed down through the generations. Jack, a part-time veterinarian, loves horses and cattle just like his grandfather.



Owned and operated by Lynne and Jack Johnson, Johnson Hereford Farm, of Milford, Iowa, celebrated 106 years in the Hereford breed in 2024.

A game changer

In 1941, Jack's mother and father, Gladys and Dale Johnson, bought into the family operation after their marriage a year prior. Around this time, hip-high cattle were extremely popular.

“The dwarf stuff was winning Denver, and they were bringing a lot of money in the '40s,” Jack says. “Dad and Grandpa decided they'd better go buy the best bull they could somewhere else.”

Their decision proved to be prescient, as some of the popular bulls of the day possessed the dwarfism gene. Ultimately, E.O. and Dale purchased a bull from Bones' Herefords in 1947 and renamed him Golden Aster. He helped put Johnson Hereford Farms on the map. When the industry turned away from belt-buckle-high bulls, the Johnsons and Golden Aster were there.

“And the good part, when it got all said and done, in the '50s, we were using him real heavy,” Jack says. “When dwarfs were all over the place, we were one of six or seven herds in the country that didn't have any. And our bulls were in high demand all over the country.”



Jack and Lynne Johnson pride themselves on their numerous Dams of Distinction over the years. They place emphasis on selecting and retaining females.

Golden Aster stifled himself as a young bull. Due to his injury, the Johnsons brought the cows to Golden Aster. They separated their cows and calves, and when the cows were brought back to the farm, Golden Aster would breed them. At the age of 5, Jack was jumping on horseback and moving the cows twice a day.

“My job as a boy was to go down and bring the cows. We kept the calves at home, and my job was to bring the cows home and nurse them. And consequently, I got to know the calves and the cows really well.

“When Dad and Grandpa came looking for a bull for a bull buyer, they’d have me go along to tell them which bull was which, because I knew them better,” Jack says. “That’s how I got interested in it.”

Golden Aster lived to be 13 years old, and his progeny were used heavily in the Johnson herd. Golden Aster impacted herds across the country while helping the Johnson family top sales and shows in the ’50s and ’60s.

Today’s herd

Jack bought into the farm in 1977, after graduating from veterinary school in 1970 and moving back to the farm to work with his dad and continue his veterinary practice. The Singer sewing machine currently sits in Jack and Lynne’s bedroom — and Hereford cows dot the pasture. Their herd size has fluctuated over the years, but there are around 50 head registered under the Johnson surname in 2024.

“Graduating from vet school was a big step, and I always wanted to come back and run this place,” Jack says. “I told Dad that.”

Jack prioritizes phenotypically appealing females with good udders and thick haircoats for their Iowa winters. He

places emphasis on the AHA’s Dams of Distinction program and prides himself on owning females that meet the program’s rigorous requirements.

He studies pedigrees closely and has done so since he was young. In 2008, the Johnsons started introducing polled cattle. Their cow herd features Extra Deep and Wrangler bloodlines. Jack keeps several impactful herd bulls around, and their current herd sires are Cuda, Historic and Houston sons.

Jack values the Hereford breed’s docility more than anything. He grew to appreciate the disposition of his Hereford cows after working near daily with a broad variety of other breeds through his veterinary practice.

“That’s the reason I love the Herefords. They’ve been really good to me,” he says.

The Johnsons have tried to stay away from fads over the years. They mostly sell bulls by private treaty to commercial buyers within 100 miles of Milford. They also sell replacement females and 4-H steers.

“We always emphasize, to our repeat customers, that we will make sure we give them a better bull than they got last time,” Jack says.

Jack and Lynne have been married for 54 years, and continue to show at local county fairs, including the Clay County Fair, with help from their eight grandchildren. Their sons, Jim, Chris, Louis and Thomas, grew up on the farm, exhibiting Hereford cattle. The cow herd brings joy to the couple, and they love seeing the next generation continue the Johnson family tradition.

For more than 100 years, Johnson Hereford Farms has been a northwest Iowa staple. **HW**



Jack Johnson surveys his herd. These Hereford cows graze the same land where his dad and grandpa grew up.