

Gentleman Stockman

James Bennett left a legacy of performance, breed improvement and service in the beef industry.

by *Katie Maupin Miller*

James Bennett cut a large, dashing figure but never an imposing one. Yet his strong leadership was vital to developing the breed-wide genetic evaluations and genetic selection tools seedstock and commercial producers enjoy today.

“Giants like James Bennett are rare in this world — Mr. James was certainly a giant as a man, as a husband, as a father and grandfather, as a cattleman and farmer, as an advocate of agriculture and a devout Christian. He was always the same — steadfast, true and principled in everything he did in life,” says Dr. Ronnie Green, University of Nebraska-Lincoln chancellor emeritus.

Imagine defining and standardizing the performance measures and data collection

that would ultimately lead to accurate genetic prediction. Many were involved. All were independent thinkers, industry mavericks searching for ways to improve beef cattle performance when the concept was still foreign to most cattlemen in the late-1960s and early-'70s.

Tempers could flare in the meetings and discussions, which led to the birth of the Beef Improvement Federation (BIF), in rooms full of forward-thinking, progressive producers and academics with confident opinions.

Yet, James’ booming baritone voice was rarely raised on such occasions. True to his Biblical namesake, he was quick to listen and slow to speak. During challenging discussions, James sat



back and listened carefully to all points and counterpoints before speaking. His response was so thoughtful and well-measured that it often laid further debate to rest, remembers Dr. Bob Hough, a BIF Pioneer Award winner.

James' belief in the greater good of the beef industry secured his legacy as a performance pioneer and an innovative stockman, but his way of doing so made his name synonymous with gentleman.

Humble beginnings

James Bennett was born to Paul Dewey Bennett and Hannah Baldwin Jennings Bennett in 1933 when the country was still in the throes of the Great Depression. His early childhood was spent working on his family's diversified operation, which grew most of the food the family needed, as well as share-cropped tobacco. Seeing his son's interest in cattle, Paul D. purchased four registered Hereford heifers in 1944. Those four females would mark the beginning of Knoll Crest Farm's (KCF) seedstock operation at Red House, Va., but it was James who selected the operation's very first foundation females with two heifers he selected and purchased with \$600 he had saved. One of the heifers even topped a regional show, but when James was offered \$1,000 for her, he refused. Even at an early age, he knew the importance of foundational genetics.

By 1950, the Bennett family had found solid footing after the Great Depression. James and his father made a trip to the National Polled Hereford Show. Struck by the spectacle of the showring, James wanted a short-coupled "belt buckle" show-like bull to be their next herd sire. However, his father imparted a piece of essential advice that would shape James' perspective of the seedstock industry. "In order to grow beef, you have to have a rack to hang it on," noted Paul D. They came home with an unstylishly larger framed bull.

James set off to further his education at Virginia Tech in 1950, backed by his savings and a Sears and Roebuck scholarship. Sadly, his father's ill health kept him from finishing his degree, and he returned home to the helm of the family farm. Despite not being able to finish his formal education, James spent his life dedicated to learning. He was an avid supporter of Extension education opportunities and his alma matter. He held the university in such high regard that he was even tapped to join its Board of Visitors (Trustees) in 1981, making him one of the only board members to serve without a



James Bennett is one of the founding fathers of performance testing sires. The Red House Bull Evaluation Center he opened, fondly known as Bull Hill, used a ground breaking high-forage diet to test performance.

college degree, although he made no pretense about his background.

When he returned home to the farm in 1951, James began to steer Knoll Crest from a tobacco farm into the seedstock cattle operation it is today. That transition had to take a brief interlude as he was called to serve in the U.S. Army in 1954. Until his discharge in 1957, James spent his time serving his country and envisioning his cattle operation's future. He was honorably discharged a month early, so he could return to Red House in time for planting.

The tested best

After his stint in the service, James learned his previous professor, George Linton, and others had founded the country's first Beef Cattle Improvement Association (BCIA) in 1955 to shrug off the industry's tendency for small "belt buckle" cattle and embrace a performance-driven beef herd. Remembering his father's wise words, James immediately joined the science-centric movement and took the first steps to become the performance pioneer he is remembered as today.

"Begin with the end in mind — there was an endpoint to all that James Bennett did," says Doug Gerber, who served as cochairman of the American Polled Hereford Association (APHA) Strategic Planning committee with James. "Some people don't think their breeding programs through on the endpoint, but Mr. Bennett did because he knew all cattle, if they don't die on the farm, will hang up on a hook from the hocks."

In 1963, James enrolled Knoll Crest's cow herd in the Virginia BCIA's whole-herd reporting program. Around this same time, James dove into then-unpopular performance testing, seeking objective measurements of his genetics, despite scathing editorials against the practice that ran

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in cattle publications of the time. He started testing bulls in the early-'60s. In 1972, armed with his experience from chairing the Culpeper Bull Test, James founded the well-known Red House Bull Evaluation Center, affectionately known as "Bull Hill," with the then-radical idea to test the potential sires on a high-forage diet while they lived in big pens with lots of room for exercise. Many doubted that this approach would lead to the impressive gains other tests found using high concentrate-based rations in confinement. James was unsurprised when the Red House bull tests yielded similar gains as the other BCIA-recognized tests. James' forage-first approach was so successful that it garnered national attention and soon became the norm for other performance testing centers.

"Beef cattle breeding and improvement is now light-years ahead of where he started with centralized bull testing at Red House on 'Bull Hill' over 60 years ago," Green says. "When I think of James, I think of one of the 'fathers' of the performance movement that has done so much to change the industry for the better."

Performance pioneer

James' firsthand experience mining performance data from Knoll Crest's herd made him an invaluable leader in the performance revolution. He was truly a pioneer who helped shape countless industry standards still used today. In 1976, James served as BIF committee chairman to study calculating adjusted yearling weight, in addition to being tapped to co-chair the BIF bull test standing committee. These committee appointments made James one of the stockmen who set the standards for performance metrics and defined the terms against which they'd be measured.

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As Hereford breeder Dennis Birdsall, who worked at Knoll Crest in the 1990s, recalls, James put a number to everything. "He was so analytical that in a discussion, he'd say, 'I think there is an



James Bennett saved his money as a young man to purchase two Hereford heifers in the mid-1940s. He is pictured with "Jewel" his first show heifer.

85% chance of that,' and I always wondered how he quantified his logic," Birdsall says. "But by his own model, I'd say of all purebred breeders, 20% are elite and of that 20%, 99% are promoters and salesmen, and Mr. Bennett was in the 1% of the most elite seedstock producers that wanted to make better beef cattle by using their inquisitive minds to improve not only for themselves but for their customers and the beef industry as a whole."

Rightfully so, James spent time at the helm of many beef cattle organizations, from BIF and BCIA to breed associations like the APHA, where he used his performance know-how to bolster breed metrics through service on the genetic-focus committee and research and education committee. His industry-wide service garnered him nearly countless accolades over the years, including the BIF Continuing Service Award and Pioneer Award and induction into the American Hereford Association (AHA) Hall of Fame and the Virginia Livestock Hall of Fame. His practice-based selection meant Knoll Crest Farm was recognized two times as the BIF Seedstock Producer of the Year. James and Knoll Crest became synonymous with performance-driven, purebred genetics, and that approach echoes through the breeds they were involved with to this day. Perhaps most importantly, James created a clear trail for the industry to follow; as fellow Hereford breeder and BIF Pioneer Award winner Glen Klippenstein says, "He left tracks that someone can follow. He blazed a path that others could journey through."

Commercial cowman's comrade

From the birth of Knoll Crest Farm, the cattle bred by the Bennett family were tailored to commercial producers.

"James bred cattle that were built for his and his customers' environment," says Jack Ward,

AHA executive vice president. “He believed in objective measurements and no-nonsense cattle with strong attention to details of structure and type. He always backed his product and believed in customer service, and he endorsed technology for genetic improvement.”

The Bennett family long favored profitable, performance-driven traits, and even when their brand of beef cattle wasn’t in-vogue ringside, there was no shortage of demand for KCF cattle in the countryside.

“He worked really hard, with his commercial producers in mind, to get rid of problems. He started pigmenting the cattle, and he really worked on udders. He would say that most of his customers did their chores on the weekend. They had outside jobs. So that meant that five days a week, his cattle better be trouble-free,” Hough says.

According to Hough, James liked to keep his cattle “between the ditches,” as he dubbed it. This meant that Knoll Crest cattle avoided the wild peaks of industry fads and trends, preferring the well-worn middle where efficient, productive and profitable beef cattle were found. And this type of cattle wasn’t born based upon numbers alone, but rather by an artful mix of phenotype and performance.

“First and foremost, he was a true-blue cattleman; he understood a critter,” Klippenstein says. “And he could walk into a pen, quietly, folding his arms, look at the animals, see what he was seeing and draw some very accurate conclusions onto what their worth might be to his operation.”

The demand for the proven KCF genetics sent dozens of Bennett-bred bulls to stud, exported

cattle to several countries and sold cattle to nearly every state in the union.

In the Hereford breed, Knoll Crest’s mark was firmly planted. When considering the top 110 sires of the last half century, in terms of their registered direct progeny, KCF bulls make the list four times. For perspective, Knoll Crest is one of six Hereford operations that can claim four or more bulls from the top 110 most-used Hereford sires of the last 50 years. Bulls such as KCF Victor 08N X4 and KCF Bennett Encore Z311 ET have sired more than 2,000 progeny registered with the AHA and will long be remembered for their industry impact. And James will long be remembered for his leadership to the Hereford breed.

“He did serve as an ambassador for the breed and worked to encourage the use of objective measures for all economically relevant traits,” Ward says. “He believed in breed complementarity for crossbreeding, and he stayed focused on the value of Hereford genetics within the industry.”

While he often led by example, his quiet, fair and steady leadership proved invaluable during tender times in the breed, such as spawning talks of a merger between the horned and polled Associations.

Far-reaching influence

There are scarcely enough pages to record James’ tireless service to the beef industry and beyond. From his love for all things soil and water to his lifelong commitment to the Providence Baptist Church, and most importantly, his unwavering devotion to his childhood sweetheart and wife of 66 years, Barbara, and their children: Elizabeth B. Holthaus and husband, Lowrey; Paul S.

Bennett and wife, Tracy; James G. Bennett and wife, Annette; Brian R. Bennett and wife, Cara; and Jonathan H. Bennett and wife, Melissa.

In the 1980s, sons Jim, Paul and Brian joined James at Knoll Crest, and his guidance lives on in not only the Bennett family’s commitment to producing quality, performance-driven beef cattle but also his sons’ and his son’s-sons’ calm, quiet and gentlemanly approach to service. His influence echoes not only in the breed-defining cattle he raised but, more importantly, the family. As Dr. Hough simply says: “He raised a great family that he can be really proud of, and he raised a lot of really great cattle.” **HW**



While James Bennett will long be remembered for raising good cattle, he raised a great family. James (centered) is pictured with his sons.