

Building on a Legacy

One of the oldest registered Hereford herds in the U.S. calls eastern Iowa home.

by *Sydnee Shive*

Take a summertime drive down Indian Avenue near Mechanicsville, Iowa, and you'll see the usual rural sights — a few houses, barns, machine sheds and the occasional field of soybeans or corn. But the groups of bald-faced red cows on green grass near the gravel road should catch your eye. Those Hereford cows aren't just any cattle. They are part of one of the oldest registered Hereford herds in the U.S. and represent a legacy cultivated by more than a couple lifetimes' worth of hard work, dedication, tenacity and passion.

Founded in the 1890s by Frank Jackson, Jackson Hereford Farms began registering Hereford cattle about 10 years after the American Hereford Association (AHA) was founded in 1881 — and hasn't stopped since. More than 130 years later, the operation has been passed down through five generations and is currently managed by Craig and Brian Jackson, and their sister, Nicole Ehler, with help from their family members.

The siblings know what they have is rare.



Jackson Hereford Farms is currently operated by the fifth generation of Jacksons. Pictured (l to r) are: Brian Jackson, Craig Jackson and Nicole Ehler.

"The land. The cattle. It's only ours for a little while when you really look at it," Brian says. "It's an honor to have it. Truly, we are lucky."

Making history

Frank laid the foundation for Jackson Hereford Farms in 1890, when he partnered with Gil Burleigh, a U.S. senator from Maine who brought the first pedigreed Hereford cattle west of the Mississippi. He began working as the senator's herdsman.

"That was in 1890, and Frank worked for wages and for shares of cattle," Brian says.

When Burleigh dispersed his share of the herd in 1902, Frank moved his cattle to a 160-acre tract on the northeast edge of Mechanicsville.

In 1919, Frank's son, Allen, joined the operation and purchased the farm in 1926. Allen's son and the siblings' grandfather, Buell, joined the operation about 15 years later in 1940 and took over in 1953.

Bloodlines such as Anxiety II and IV, Prince Domino, Prospector and Line One, were used through the years. The operation started utilizing AI extensively in the '60s, along with collecting data and, ultimately, whole-herd reporting. The family wanted to offer a product to customers that was high performing and backed by data.

Then in 1978, Buell Jackson & Sons was officially incorporated. Buell and his wife, Helen, had five children, LeRoy, Ron, Gary, Arlen and Loren, who all played important roles on the farm. A year later, at the 1979 National Western Stock Show in Denver, Colo., they sold three-quarter interest of JHF 439 L1 Dom 867, or "Fritz," to a buyer in Uruguay for \$30,000.

"Fritz was what really put us on the map," Craig says. "That bull sold for \$30,000 at that time."

Fritz arrived on the scene just as larger-framed cattle were becoming industry standard. While the Jacksons didn't want to breed for extremes, they wanted to raise cattle that could win.

"That was kind of our claim to fame, the bigger-frame cattle," Craig says. "And so, in the late '70s, starting then, and '80s and '90s is when we really had a lot of interest in the herd because we had something everybody wanted, and that was bigger-frame cattle. And we did well in the show arena at that time."

"And grandpa always said we were ahead of our time," Craig says. "We were a trendsetter."

Over the years, the Jacksons developed a strong private treaty market for their bulls and females.

The turn of the century

Through it all, the Jackson family kept careful records. From poring over sale books dating back to the 1800s, old photographs, original registration papers, notebooks and other pages detailing the herd, it's easy to get lost in the operation's deep history.

"It would be nice if the true historian of the farm was here; that was our grandfather, Buell," Brian says. "There's a book my grandma and grandpa put together. I don't know who started keeping articles; I would call them articles of the operation, just pictures, stories and things like that. But they made this book so that they could give one to each of their kids. They have things in here that you can spend quite some time reading."



In 1979, three-quarters of JHF 439 L1 Dom 867, or "Fritz," sold to a buyer in Uruguay for \$30,000.

Buell and Helen maintained their history books with as much love and attention to detail as they gave their cow herd.

When Buell passed away in 2012, LeRoy and Gary continued the operation. LeRoy managed the cow herd, and Gary oversaw the farmland.

LeRoy continued building on what the generations before him had spent their entire lives working on: the family farm and its Hereford cattle.

"To our father, LeRoy, that was his pride and joy," Nicole says. "He lived and breathed these cattle. If he was in a conversation, it didn't matter who he was talking to or what about; eventually it would come back to cattle."

LeRoy and his wife, Joyce, had four children: Brian, Brad, Craig and Nicole. LeRoy and Buell were both involved in the Iowa Hereford Association, and this newest generation showed cattle and participated in their state and national junior associations. They showed at local, state and national levels in the '70s, '80s and '90s.

"Back in those times, just to win supreme heifer at the county fair with a Hereford was something that hadn't been done through the '70s and '80s, especially when the Exotic breeds came in," Craig says. "Finally, in the 1990s, we had five supreme heifers overall with a Hereford heifer. That was unheard of at that time."

All the while, LeRoy and Buell were teaching the next generation everything they could about raising cattle.



For generations, high-quality herd sires have been a hallmark of Jackson Hereford Farms.

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“Dad was a major influence on the type of cattle. He wanted good feet, good structure, and he taught us a lot about that. You’re not going to have anything if you don’t have that,” Craig says. “He instilled that, even when we were little. He talked about what we needed.”

For as long as the group could remember, their family dinner table was constantly covered with notes, and papers detailing expected progeny differences (EPDs), and buyer information. LeRoy was always on the phone, speaking with potential buyers and searching for opportunities.

“We’re honest people when it comes to business,” Craig says. “I think that’s helped keep us alive, too. People really liked buying cattle from our father. We don’t want to put a bad animal out there. We want people to come back.”

The Jackson siblings began taking over the farm in 2017, when Gary decided to sell his share of the operation to his nephews and niece.

Weathering the storm

On Aug. 10, 2020, three years after the siblings began taking over the farm, a derecho destroyed generations of hard work in less than an hour. A derecho is widespread, typically long-lasting, straight-line windstorm. The 120-mph winds leveled buildings, including the family’s two gabled barns, and ruined concrete silos, grain bins and fences. The herd of Hereford cattle and the Jacksons, were unharmed. The event was traumatic and heart-wrenching. The ongoing rebuild hasn’t been easy.

“When that derecho hit, between our family, our kids, our friends, we probably had, I don’t know how many volunteers came out here, 40, 50 people, maybe more than that,” Brian says. “It’s just because they knew how much it meant, you know, to us. It was so tough. I don’t know where it comes from. It must have come from Dad or Mom. That passion, the enchantment that this place has.”

Then, in 2022, LeRoy, who suffered from Alzheimer’s disease, passed away at the age of 81.

“LeRoy just lived and breathed the cattle until he passed. He was always asking to get back to the farm,” Nicole says. “I need to check on the cattle. I need to check on the cattle.’ I think that’s kind of why we feel so connected to the herd here. He embedded that into us.”



The Jackson family at the 1977 Iowa Junior Hereford Association field day hosted at their farm. Pictured, back row (l to r) are: Loren, Arlen, Marilyn and Gary Jackson. Middle row (l to r) are: LeRoy, Joyce, Helen and Buell Jackson. Front row (l to r) are: Brian and Brad Jackson.

Each of the Jackson siblings had a full-time job or other occupation, and the decision to keep the herd going was one they didn’t take lightly.

“We know how hard Grandpa and our uncles worked,” Nicole says. “And it’s really hard to see all those people work so hard, and then watch the land be rented out to somebody, or watch it be farmed by somebody else or have a different breed of cattle on the place. It would have been pretty hard.”

For more than a year, the group discussed what they wanted to do. An old article, included in the compilation of notes and artifacts carefully curated by prior generations, helped them make their decision.

“The article said, ‘The Jackson family has deep ties to their land and their Hereford cattle in Cedar County. Something that makes Buell proud. He hopes many future generations will continue the tradition,’” Brian says. “When we did decide that this was something that we were going to do, I think we decided that because of that article, more than anything.”

One year after losing LeRoy, Brad tragically succumbed to Lou Gehrig’s disease, or ALS.

“We were dealing with the transition of taking over the farm as well as managing a parent with an illness,” Nicole says. “And then our brother fell ill with ALS, who was also part of this. Before that, we had the derecho, which was just heartbreaking. We are still processing that, emotionally. You face everyday challenges such as the weather, markets and things that are just not going as planned. But there are also larger life challenges that occur.”

Moving forward, looking ahead

In seven short years, the siblings have learned a lot, and overcome more challenges than most will deal with in one lifetime.

“You have something bad happen and then you get up the next day and it’s like, ‘OK, we can beat this, or we can get around this,’” Craig says. “‘We can make this work better.’ That’s probably the biggest thing I’ve learned is fortitude.”

Today, there are around 80 head of Hereford cattle that call Jackson Hereford Farms home.

“We want to continue what was started for us,” Craig says “The legacy. We don’t want to veer from what we were taught. We want longevity, we want functionality, we want the whole package in our cattle, with a complete phenotype and EPD profile. That’s what we’re striving for — get the best possible product out there for our customers.”

The Jacksons continue to sell private treaty bulls and females, and occasionally sell show heifers and steers. They sell quarters and halves of beef to 20-30 customers a year. They recently started consigning to the National Hereford Sale, like the generations before them.

They’ve also integrated embryo transfer (ET) in their program. Both Buell and LeRoy were quick to use new technology to improve their herd, and the trio strives to do the same. They work hard to establish connections with customers, like their dad and grandpa.

“They liked working with people. They liked working with cattle,” Nicole says. “I think that’s been instilled in us, just being hard-working, honest and family focused.”

Nicole, Brian and Craig are working to get the sixth generation of Jacksons more involved on the farm. In the meantime, they’re happy to be part of Jackson Hereford Farms’ 134-year history.

“It’s just a really cool story that we get to be a part of and are fortunate to be a part of,” Nicole says. “We’re part of it. We’re just a little bit of it.”

“It’s a great life,” Craig says. “I don’t think we would trade it.” **HW**

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— Brian Jackson

