

A Tradition of Excellence

Oklahoma State University earns Century Breeder recognition.

by *Sydnee Shive*

Just west of Stillwater, Okla., along State Highway 51, it's hard to miss the various black, red and white-faced cattle dotting the pasture adjacent to the road. Home to Oklahoma State University's (OSU) Purebred Beef Cattle Center, the university's prolific animal science department has been breeding Hereford cattle for more than 100 years. They were officially recognized by the American Hereford Association (AHA) as a Century Breeder in 2025.

Today, the herd consists of about 250-300 head of Hereford, Angus, Simmental and Brangus brood cows. In an era where the number of university purebred beef herds in the U.S. seems to shrink each year, the OSU herd has stood the test of time while providing the first-class education that defines the university.

"I think that's what makes Oklahoma State so unique in terms of being a land-grant university. There are not very many other universities across the country where you can go and find elite seedstock," says Grant Hubbard, OSU purebred herd manager. "That's in terms of our cattle operation, and we have a really good sheep and swine operation in addition to our dairy and horse units."

The impacts of the center reach far beyond the pasture, from former employees and alumni making their mark on the beef industry to the practical experience it provides visitors of all ages and backgrounds.

Loyal and true

The purebred beef herd at OSU has roots in both the Hereford and Angus breeds dating back to the 1920s, when the university was still Oklahoma A&M College. Over the years, and as the beef industry has changed, they've added and culled breeds from the herd. About 30 to 40 head of Hereford cattle are in the present-day herd inventory.

Today, the herd grazes about 1,800 acres of Bermuda, improved pastures and native grasses,

including the headquarters on the outskirts of Stillwater and pasture located in between Lake Carl Blackwell and Lake McMurtry.

At the center's core: providing hands-on education and outreach through high-quality cattle.

"It is a source of pride among alumni," according to Mark Johnson, Ph.D., OSU professor and Extension specialist. "It is something we can use to give students real-world, hands-on experiences. It really does facilitate student recruitment. I believe it elevates the quality of education we're able to give."

Between events like field days, state FFA and 4-H contests and livestock judging team workouts, Johnson estimates 2,000 to 3,000 potential OSU students see the university's cattle each year. The herd serves its educational purpose through classes, workshops and Extension services. Johnson and Hubbard both say the top-quality seedstock also aids in recruiting efforts.



Hosting learning activities for groups of young people from breed associations, like the 2021 Faces of Leadership Conference, is integral to OSU's land-grant mission of outreach and education.

“The quality of the cattle really is one of the things that I know attracted me to OSU years ago, the first time I saw them,” Johnson says. “We still get feedback that it really impacts youth development and the appeal of OSU to students coming to school.”

Beyond the classroom

In its early days, the university exhibited cattle at national and regional shows. While they still exhibit highly competitive pens at shows like Cattlemen’s Congress, more emphasis is placed on developing and marketing performance-driven bulls built to serve commercial cattlemen. Annually, the university hosts the Cowboy Classic Production Sale — March 2026 marked their 47th event.

Like all beef operations, the goal for OSU’s cow herd is to improve the quality of genetics it provides its customers each year while keeping the budget in the black. Financial responsibility, herd health and consistent genetic improvement are all essential to a sound operation. Students who work in OSU’s Purebred Beef Cattle Center learn skills that are as real-life as it gets.

“The whole point of a college education is to get prepared for the 60 to 80 years of your life that follow. Particularly, in the world of beef production, one of the things I love about it is if you’re in the cattle business, it holds you accountable,” Johnson says. “If your heifer’s calving, and you’re not there to help, and she’s having some trouble, there’s no calling in sick, there are no mulligans, you have to be there and tend to it.”

Hubbard explains the center employs five to seven students a year.

“We try to put our employees in as many real-world scenarios as possible and give them opportunities to learn and refine their craft,” Hubbard says. “I think that’s what Oklahoma State does really well. It’s a lot of real-world opportunities and meeting people within the industry that can be an asset for you — or you can be one for them — down the road.”

Universities with access to opportunities like the ones provided by the OSU Purebred Beef Center are invaluable. Ideally, students who’ve worked in the center go on to manage their own herds or make impacts on other facets of the beef industry.

For instance, flipping through the Cowboy Classic sale book and comparing the expected progeny differences (EPDs) in class before viewing the cattle at the center is comparable to producer research before making purchasing and breeding decisions. Work done by students and staff each day keeps the ranch thriving. Experience outside the classroom prepares OSU graduates for success when they enter the workforce.

“I think all those things are vital if you’re preparing folks to be in our business in the purebred sector, that they can see it and see how it actually works, and not just talk about it in the classroom,” says Cindy Pribil, who served as the OSU center herdsman for 11 years. “It’s vital to universities that they have these educational herds.”



OSU Houston 3300 led off the Hereford lots in the 2024 Cowboy Classic Production Sale, selling for \$25,000. He’s being used heavily as an AI sire in the Hereford breed. OSU’s primary customer base is in the state of Oklahoma, but they’ve sold registered bulls and females from coast to coast and into Canada.

The Cowboy way

Only a handful of U.S. beef herds have been maintained for more than 100 years. Even fewer are owned by universities. The Purebred Beef Center is a mainstay at OSU, but generations of alumni, donors and stalwart believers in the program are embedded in the herd’s 100-year success story. As the years have gone by, each manager has made their own facility updates and seen the center through positive change.

“It’s been just like the progression of a graph going up, which is something all of us that work there and have worked there can be proud of,” Pribil says.

The OSU Purebred Beef Center has touched countless lives — from past employees with Hereford influence like Joel Birdwell, 2019-2020 AHA president and former OSU herd manager, and Pribil, a current AHA Board member — to the long list of industry leaders, cattlemen and women and other trailblazers with ties to the herd.

OSU’s Century Breeder status represents the hard work, vision and dedication of many.

“Those of us accepting this recognition right now, we’re not the ones that did the heavy labor all those years ago to get this started,” Johnson says. “It’s a recognition of a lot of people and generations of OSU faculty and staff that have made it work and maintained it.” **HW**