World Class

Churchill Cattle Co. disperses after more than 45 years in the breed.

by ***Sydnee Shive***

After the last female — lot 191 — was sold, Dale Venhuizen sat perched on the block and looked out at the uncharacteristically strong end-of-sale crowd. He didn't know what to say. He was speechless.

Churchill Cattle Co., owned by Dale and his wife, Nancy, near Manhattan, Mont., has left an indelible impression on the Hereford breed.

History was made in the Gallatin Valley Sept. 18-19, 2025. The dispersal of Churchill Cattle Co. was more than a sale. It was a storybook ending to Churchill's more than 45 years in the Hereford breed, a place for camaraderie, fellowship and a representation of a life well-lived.

"This whole experience was something that two or three years before, we'd never imagined could happen," Dale says. "That this many people would show up, and we would sell that many cows and bring those prices. All those things were a surprise to us. Our timing was also very fortunate. We're thankful to the Lord for that."

Those two days in Montana were unlike any other. At the conclusion of the sale, 425 lots sold for an average of $24,504 — a gross of more than $10.4 million.

Laying the groundwork

Dale has spent a lifetime in the Hereford breed. He grew up on a Hereford ranch and seed potato farm in southwest Montana. He and Nancy met in Calvin College's library, in Grand Rapids, Mich. Newly engaged, the couple completed their educations at Montana State University. Nancy — a self-proclaimed city girl — originally hailed from Denver, but together, they founded Churchill Cattle Co. in 1980.

If you've visited Churchill's home on Yadon Road or seen ranch photos, the mountain range backdrops are impossible to miss. But they didn't want their name to be based on their geographical location, or family name, so, they landed on Churchill — the name of one of the first bulls the couple raised. They thought the name was cool, and it stuck. The sale of DV Lord Churchill at the Western Nugget, along with the purchase of another herd in 1980, served as the foundation for their 45 years of breeding Herefords.

This was about the time the popularity of black-hided cattle skyrocketed. Continental breeds had slowly eroded Hereford's market share over the 1970s and the Angus breed was finding its strength in quality grade and its branded beef program.

"In the early '80s, we talked about moving to Angus because they were really making a big move at that point in time. But we decided to go with Herefords," Dale says. "We just dug in and said, 'Well, that's our choice, and we're going to go with it.'"

The '80s were a tough time to enter the bald-faced breed. Call it holding on to sentiment or fate — the Venhuizens stayed the path.

"There's a lot of people, who over our career, have come into the Hereford business or the purebred livestock business and been really good at something else. But being in the Hereford business got the best of them," Dale says. "It's maybe not for the faint of heart, but it was a wonderful way for us to raise our family."

Together, Dale and Nancy, alongside their four daughters, Katie, Anne, Megan and Camille, began building a legacy in the Gallatin Valley.

No stone left unturned

"That cow herd we bought in 1980. Well, they needed a little improvement," Dale says. "We looked at each other after weighing the calves that first year, and we said, 'Well, we have to do better.' It's a very competitive world, and we'd hoped to have customers — good customers — and repeat customers."

That philosophy — doing better for themselves and for their customers — is the bedrock of the couple's success.

"We were very open-minded about trying to make progress," Dale says. "Through our whole career, if a bull or cow showed up, really anywhere in America or in Canada, we were willing to consider them for our program. We kept our eyes wide open to any possible advancement."

Nancy notes that sometimes breeders can become narrow-minded — closed off to certain bloodlines or programs. "Dale never did that," she says. "He was always open to any animal he felt could better our cows or a cow that could improve our herd, whether it was polled or horned. It didn't matter who bred it, he would just be very open to using whatever animal would improve the breed."

They were constantly making tweaks and improvements to their cow herd, carefully planning mating decisions and diligently incorporating genetics they thought would make Herefords better.

"Dale and Nancy never left any rock unturned when finding the things they felt like would make an impact on their herd," says Jack Ward, American Hereford Association (AHA) executive vice president. "Whether you were raising bulls for the commercial cattleman, a show heifer or genetics from a different part of the world, they were there. And I think that just shows the kind of impact and the kind of breeding decisions they have made, because they raised a lot of cattle that certainly had a lot of value to them."

Master marketers

The Venhuizens made females that worked in the donor pen and on the range, AI-quality herd sires and bulls for the commercial producer. Their cattle were more than eye-appealing; they were curve benders. The diversity of buyers is proof of the high-quality cattle the couple bred, as was their ever-evolving marketing program.

"One thing we did learn pretty fast in this business is that marketing costs money, but if you don't do any marketing, you can be forgotten about," Dale says. "That happens in the purebred cattle business quicker than most of us think it does. We wanted to have a quality product we presented to people on a regular basis."

A core principle of their marketing: when someone calls, answer. This changed over the years — from Nancy hollering on the front porch for Dale when they got a phone call on the landline, to bag phones, to the cell phone everyone uses today. When a customer calls to order semen they speak directly to Dale or Nancy, immediately establishing a human connection. Connection was synonymous with Churchill's success.

"If you do a print ad or a social media ad, when it comes out, you're really working with the people," Dale says. "That connection — when you treat them kindly and with respect, they will come back to you more quickly than if you just brush them off."

The couple wanted anything branded with Churchill to be genuine, concise and clean. Luckily, they ran across Morgan Zeltman-Jones. "Morgan's got a real talent with a camera and pictures and design and layout. We felt that a good picture of a Hereford cow or bull is really hard to beat," Dale says.

Just as important is the work of Katie Songer, the woman behind the Churchill website. Songer also put together lot videos for the operation's annual sales for years. Her digital savvy, combined with Zeltman-Jones' aptitude with a camera and creativity, helped elevate the Venhuizen's presence on social media and leveled up their sale books. Zeltman-Jones' photos — with those stunning blue mountains in the background and Herefords with the snow cone brand on their shoulder — are part of Churchill's identity. As were the Venhuizens commitment to both learning how to improve and leading the charge.

"We'd also watch other people that were successful or try and listen to feedback," Dale says. "I think listening is important. That was one of the ways we learned to market."

Learners and leaders

"Dale and Nancy are just so unique. They adapted with changes and times. When we started working with genomics, they were among the very first to adopt that technology," Ward says. "They've never been afraid to try the most modern technology to make their cattle better and more predictable for customers. I think it's obvious with the kind of dispersal sale they had that these cattle are absolutely what the commercial industry wants and needs, and I think other breeders around the world found that. They're a Hall of Fame breeder. It's that simple."

Churchill Cattle Co. was an early adopter of any technology that could help measure performance or enhance genetic improvement, from collecting ultrasound carcass data in the '90s to partnering with Trans Ova Genetics to serve as a satellite location while heavily using embryo transfer over the last decade. They were learners, using every resource they could to make progress.

"We used as much of the information that was available," Dale says. "All the things that AHA has put out for the last 45 years we've paid attention to and used where we thought it would be helpful."

"My dad was a lifelong learner," he says. "It was the same way with Nancy's parents. They encouraged us to get involved."

Whether it was attending Annual Meeting, reading *Hereford World* or seeking opportunities to rub

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shoulders with their peers, the Venhuizens did indeed get involved. Dale is a two-term Board member, having served as AHA president in 2004. He joined the Board around the time of the merger and helped lead the AHA through the challenges that followed.

"One of the things that helped us was being involved at AHA. We always felt like we had at least a little bit of a pulse on what was going on in the breed and the industry," Dale says.

He's represented the AHA internationally and served as chairman of the 2025 World Hereford Conference. The couple worked with international customers up until their final bull sale in January 2026 and continue to export frozen genetics.

"You get a little taste of what some of these other countries are like, and a lot of their situations are just like ours," Dale says. "It's just a different country and little different on how you do things. But that's always interested me, is how things are done in other parts of the world."

Dale and Nancy always tried to envision what the future could look like, and if their current goals and genetics would still be relevant in three to four years.

"In our long career, things have changed. Cattle at one point got really big, and then all of a sudden, we, as a breed, needed calving ease, and then at another point in time, they needed carcass quality," Dale says. "We tried to think ahead and think about what would be important. Once you get on that path toward being able to provide the genetics, you just present it in a nice format and be straight up and honest, and sometimes you just lay your heart out there."

Deciding to disperse

All these things — their leadership, drive for progress, willingness to learn and dedication to the breed — made Manhattan a destination for Hereford cattle. Dale and Nancy have spent a lifetime in the Hereford breed, building a legacy. When they decided to disperse, it wasn't a decision they made lightly. Their cow herd was their life's work, livelihood and passion. A multitude of factors contributed to their decision, but neither Dale nor Nancy wanted to be in a position where the other wasn't healthy or able to be fully present. It was time.

"We've always done everything together," Dale says. "We wanted to sell them that way."

While the initial decision to sell was sad, the couple says they were almost too busy to experience any of the emotions until after the event. Things, like writing footnotes for more than 400 lots, putting together a 184-page sale book, fielding phone calls, making sure they had enough food and figuring out the best way to situate and sort cattle for viewing, kept their plates full. The family originally planned to host the event in their usual sale facility, but as more catalog requests poured in each week, they realized they would need something bigger. Still, the seats under the big-top tent were shoulder-to-shoulder both days of the dispersal.

"We just would remark about every week and say, 'Man, there must be a lot of interest in Herefords,'" Dale says. "And then, people kept calling."

The sale was all-hands-on-deck, with the entire Venhuizen family present — all four daughters and their families — to the more than 20 livestock marketeers with a role in the auction. They also credit their staff, Colby Atchison, Megan and Olivia Leep and Shiloh Klein, for helping things run smoothly.

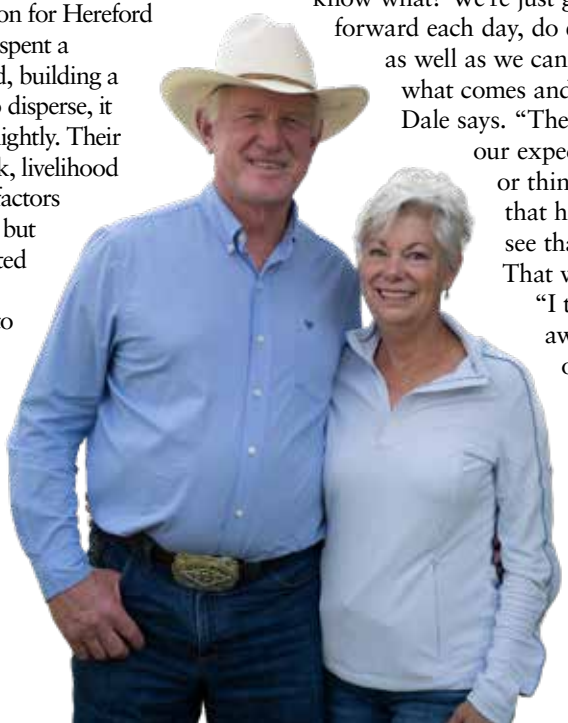
"They really took ownership of things, had a lot of pride in the cattle and the product and the work that we were doing. They got geared up for it. It wasn't a very fun day telling them we were going to sell the cows," Dale says.

"To their credit, all of them stuck with us the whole time, and they worked hard," Nancy says. "They did a really good job."

As the catalog requests rolled in, the Venhuizens knew interest in their sale was good. They knew people were talking about it. Although every catalog request doesn't turn into a sale, the family sent out more than 900 catalogs beyond their usual mailing list.

"Instead of saying, 'We're hoping for this, or this is what we would like to do,' we said, 'You know what? We're just going to put our best foot forward each day, do every step along the way as well as we can and we're going to take what comes and be happy with that,'" Dale says. "The sale certainly exceeded our expectations. We didn't know or think the cattle would sell that high. It was humbling to see that many people show up. That was pretty incredible."

"I think the sale just blew away all of our standards of what we thought was going to happen," Atchison says. "It just shows how many people respected Dale as a cattleman and wanted to come get their genetics one last time."



A fitting end

"I just couldn't believe how many of our peers and people that really make our breed and our business go that showed up and maybe found something that they liked," Dale says. "I don't know quite what else you would say, except it was just very humbling and very rewarding to have those people there."

The $24,504 average is unheard of. So was the large crowd that remained in the tent to the last lot and the steady interest right to the end of the dispersal. Demand for their genetics speaks for itself through the sale figures. Their dispersal was also a great place to connect with new people and see old friends, and a testament to the relationships and friendships the couple has cultivated.

From the first lot to the last lot, the crowd at the Churchill Cattle Co. World Class Dispersal, Sept. 18-19, 2025, was strong. The Venhuizens estimate 500-600 people attended the event.

"We got several comments like, 'I really enjoyed this sale. I had a good time. I saw people I hadn't seen for years or met a new friend,'" Dale says. "We hope this gave Hereford breeders a shot in the arm. A big crowd will show up for quality cattle and opportunity and pay good prices for it."

"This created more enthusiasm for the breed," Ward says. "If you do the right things, cattle are going to have some real value to them in the Hereford breed."

More than 500 Hereford breeders convened for the unmatched opportunity to pick up the right pieces in Manhattan. Perhaps just as valuable was the energy resulting from their dispersal. They kicked off the 2025-2026 sale season strong, and it never slowed.

"From just the Churchill cattle part of it, there's a whole bunch of really good females and herd bulls that went out into different places where people can utilize them and hopefully make their program better and more competitive," Dale says. "The beef industry is looking to the Hereford breed."

For their time as Hereford seedstock producers, the Venhuizens goal was to get better. Serve their customers better, make their herd better, make others better and make Herefords better. The public sale of their cow herd allowed them to guide the breed toward better, one more time.

The next chapter

"We're really proud of the Hereford breed," Dale says. "The popularity, I mean, where we're sitting at today in 2026 from when we started — I would say we're very proud of that."

"To see the interest and the popularity of them is really exciting," Nancy says.

As the couple enters a new stage of their lives, they're excited to see their 12 grandchildren more often, take a few more vacations and rest easy knowing they left the Hereford breed better than they found it.

Fortunately, there's still Hereford cattle on Yadon Road. Atchison, who owns Four Diamond Livestock with his wife, Brie, is leasing the Churchill place for his Hereford herd. He's using many of the lessons Dale and Nancy taught him to start building his own bald-faced legacy — one not only of good cattle but of kindness.

"I've seen that day-to-day," Atchison says. "Dale's always talking and working with people on the phone or going to their ranch and helping them out and trying to improve their herd. He'd like to see somebody else succeed before he does."

As much as the Venhuizens love Hereford cattle, they love the people more. Even without their own herd, Dale and Nancy will continue to impact the breed. In their effort to help young people, the Venhuizens are introducing the Hereford Herd Builder program. Using embryos from their donor cows, they're implanting recipient cows and annually awarding pregnant recips to a handful of National Junior Hereford Association members to help jumpstart their cow herds.

"We raise Hereford cattle for the cattle, but it's really a people business," Dale says. "People were kind to us when we were starting. You want people to be the best they can be. If we have an experience or a thought that could help someone else be the best they can be, why not share it?"

Sept. 18-19, 2025, is written in the Hereford history books. It was the type of sale you typically only see once in a lifetime and share stories about for the years that follow. It's nearly impossible to write the end of your own story — or in this case, the closing of a chapter — the way Dale and Nancy have. As far as endings go, this one was close to perfect. And their story is still being written.

At the conclusion of the sale, Dale shared a few words with the crowd. "Well, thank you all very much. I'm just kind of speechless. We don't know what to say except a big thank you … from the bottom of our hearts, thank you." HW

Editor's Note: Flip to Page 194 to learn more about the Hereford Herd Builder program and watch for more information in the September *Hereford World* and at *Hereford.org*. Applications are due in September.