

CONTINUING THE TRADITION

Oklahoma's K74 herd establishes new roots in the Lone Star state with the private treaty sale to W4 Ranch, Morgan, Texas.

Story and photos by Maggie Martin



The Hereford tradition that began at K74 in Oklahoma is carrying on at the W4 Ranch, Morgan, Texas. In April, the K74 herd, known for its rugged range bulls and functional cows, sold by private treaty to W4 Ranch. With this new investment, the manager and owners look forward to expanded opportunities and the chance to become one of the top Hereford seedstock producers in Texas.

“We believe with the K74 foundation herd we can be a prominent seedstock breeder in a shorter period of time,” says Jay Wright, general manager of W4. “We were headed in that direction, but it takes time to become what the K74 herd was.”

Making their way from Sulphur, Okla., to their new home in Texas were 181 spring calving cows, 105 fall calving cows, 129 open heifers and seven herd bulls.

“We feel the younger K74 cattle are probably the strongest genetically,” Wright says. “The mating program Bill Jacobs had will be a big part of W4’s future. Realizing we still have their mothers and the whole herd will help us tremendously in changing our genetic base.”

From one brand to another

Improving the genetic base at W4 in a short amount of time was the key philosophy driving this purchase. At the time of the sale, W4 was buying heifers from several different breeders when they approached K74 about acquiring some of their genetics. “We had a five year plan of being where we wanted to be genetically. We heard this great set of cows was for sale and we went to look at them,” Wright recalls.

Wright had never seen the cows and had some skepticism for the deal.

“I was playing devil’s advocate,” he explains. “I had to see if these were cattle I could take and make do what we needed them to do, for the money we were talking about. When I got there, the cattle were everything everyone said they would be. It was just a matter of getting them bought.”

At that point, Wright and W4’s owners, James, Joe and Joey Walker, decided this herd was what the ranch

“Our goal was to increase the genetic base of our cow herd with the purchase of K74.”

—Jay Wright, W4 general manager

needed to move forward in the Hereford business. The purchase has cut their five-year plan into a two-year plan to have the desired genetics they are looking for. “We have the genetics on the ranch now. All we have to do is continue what K74 started and develop it into our program,” Wright says.

Developing K74

K74 owner Cliff Knight started putting together a registered Hereford herd in the mid-1960s and continued until 1984 when his son-in-law, Bill Jacobs, came back to Oklahoma to be a managing partner in the operation.

“The K74 herd was a product of a 35-year breeding program in which every effort was made to continually move the herd toward higher quality,” Knight says. “I am proud of the consistency of quality from top to bottom in the herd. I am thankful to Bill Jacobs who has been largely responsible for the success of K74 and congratulate W4 on their purchase.”

Part of Jacobs’ philosophy for breeding cattle may have come from his background as an animal science professor at California Polytechnic University at San Luis Obispo, where he taught for 17 years.

“Cliff Knight invested a lot of money in really good females and good bulls,” Jacobs says. “He was never stingy with money to buy good herd bulls. We ended up with what I think was a really good, functional cow herd. We used bulls that would work for the commercial man, which is what I think the purebred business is all about.”

Jacobs is proud of the cow herd he helped develop and manage. “My idea was to start with the good foundation cow that would always produce a good calf,” he says. “The greatest bull in the world doesn’t always produce good calves.” This is the philosophy Jacobs says will help W4.

Good cow herds take time to build and there are lots of steps involved. “This cow herd was put together on



W4 Ranch encompasses 12,000 acres of native grasslands, water sources and improvements. The Walker family spent years developing the infrastructure and buildings in order to have a functional, working cow ranch.

maternal traits and consists of functional cows. It involved selecting for good udders and high fertility,” Jacobs adds.

The K74 herd consisted mainly of Line One genetics, but at different times Jacobs would look for an outcross bull to use. He was always concerned with the fertility of the herd.

“I was at a point where I thought I didn’t need to use old genetics; I needed to use new genetics,” he explains. “Meaning that if I bought a good bull like Blaze, I’d rather use a son of Blaze the next year instead of Blaze himself. I should improve on them.”

Even though a young bull had lower accuracies compared to a more proven bull, Jacobs gave up those EPDs in order to keep moving the cow herd forward. “What we accomplished more than anything was uniformity,” he explains. “The cattle started looking more alike. They were repeatable. They were predictable.”

“Every time I reached out for an outcross bull, if I found myself in trouble, I just came back to Line One bred cattle,” he says. “I knew they were predictable and I could save myself. My breeding program consisted of correcting the mistakes I had made two years before.”

Jacobs realizes raising cattle is a

balancing act between making breeding decisions and working with nature. “You can’t crowd Mother Nature too far or she’ll work against you, he says. “We’re always going to sell cattle by the pound. We need growth in them, but we also need quality. We just have to keep it all in balance.”

Jacobs sees big advantages in selling the whole herd to W4 and with the cows in one place it will be easy for their new owners to evaluate just how good they are. Jacobs worked 17 1/2 years trying to do the best he could with the set of cattle and he wanted to see the herd stay together.

Practicality was another reason to sell the whole herd at one time. K74 had been planning a sale in May. At that time every cow would have had a calf at side. Jacobs points out that selling 300 cow-calf pairs is very complex because some calves may have been only a week old while others would have been ready to wean.

W4 moves forward

When people start looking for bulls and females, Wright wants them to look to herds like W4. The future of W4 and its cow herd rests in the hands of Wright who says he is confident in the

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Bill Jacobs, Sulphur, Okla., worked for years to build a consistent, quality herd at K74.

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opportunity this purchase provides the ranch.

“The people I work for are super,” he says. “They want what I want, which is to produce great Hereford cattle and be known for great Hereford cattle.”

Wright understands challenges exist when upholding the tradition built by Jacobs, Knight and the K74 herd.

“The only way you can become a top herd is to prove yourself,” he says. “Buying these cattle has helped us improve the perception of W4. People know there are some good cattle here and we hope they will come in search of good calves.”

W4’s manager and owners want to provide a complete program for their customers, and they will start by sorting through the females to find the ones who are the most genetically sound with the best numbers.

“I believe numbers

K74 cows and calves make their home in the W4 pastures in Morgan, Texas.

Building the Brand

The K in K74 is for Knight. Cliff bought a ranch on Highway 74 that was just a quarter acre. He started buying land all around and called it K74.

The W4 name comes from the ranch’s founders, James and Louise Walker and their sons, Joe and James (Chip) Walker Jr.

are a big part of the breed. We need to concentrate on birth weight, weaning weight, yearling weight and milk. We don’t need to have the highest numbers in any one category, but we need to have the most complete female. The heifers that fit into those qualifications will continue to upgrade the genetic base of sound, functional seedstock,” Wright says.

Wright’s focus will always be on Herefords, but he realizes there are other markets W4 can utilize in order to make it work and to help the cash flow. Wright established a Certified F₁ program in which he breeds his older Hereford cows to Brahman bulls. The heifers and females that fall below the standards he sets for his seedstock cattle may also be mated to Angus bulls and used in his black baldy program.

With the resources available to W4, they can market registered Hereford cattle, F₁ cattle, black baldies and even Angus cattle. “We can be a place for people to come and get whatever they want,” he says. “There’s a market to produce good seedstock cattle for commercial cattlemen to use as replacement heifers.”

Although the show ring has not been a large part of the ranch’s history, they

will start showing when they have cattle that exemplify the kind they want to sell. Wright knows they need to keep costs under control in today’s cost-oriented ranching business, so they won’t show just for fun. “The show ring will be used as an advertising tool,” he explains.

Marketing the W4 herd relates directly to the continued success of the operation. The idea Wright proposed to the Walkers includes having two sales a year. The proposal is a fall sale that would cater to commercial customers who buy range bulls and the Brahman-influenced heifers. In the spring Wright would like to have a seedstock sale and sell fancy two-year-old females with calves at side that are genetically sound enough to go back into a Hereford program, herd bull prospects and show heifers.

Quantity and quality

The purchase of K74 brings the count of the W4 mother cow herd to 1,200. This gives the ranch the ability to produce nearly 400 bulls per year. “Plans are to offer 125 to 175 seedstock bulls to the commercial producer every year in our sale,” says Joe Walker, president and second generation owner of W4. They also foresee being tied in as a bull supplier to



the LaForge Signature Beef operation.

Producing that many bulls and having that many outlets also lets the ranch concentrate heavily on their female operation, which they think is just as important, if not more important, than producing bulls.

Dedication to the commercial producer is a similarity K74 and W4 share. This focus on producing seedstock for the commercial industry will continue. “Hopefully from here on out we’ll be able to offer the crossbred and Hereford females of extremely high quality,” Walker says.

As they strive to produce what the commercial cattlemen demands and expects from the seedstock producer, they plan to concentrate on low birth weight and moderate size cattle. “The

commercial cattleman needs to be able to raise a live calf in any condition. A lot of times you may get low birth weight, but you may sacrifice yearling weight. We’re trying to work our genetics using our herd bulls and our cow factory to produce moderate-sized cattle that grow quickly,” explains Walker.

The purchase of K74 has had a positive impact on the original W4 herd and keeps Wright optimistic about the herd’s future.

“No. 1, it put youth into our cow herd that we didn’t have and improved the genetics,” Walker explains. “We had decent females, but the genetics got cold along the way. The new herd milks well, raises good calves and has lots of pigment—all of these qualities will help us breed the kind of cattle we need to breed.”

It’s a new beginning for W4 as they

carry on the K74 tradition of producing quality Hereford cattle.

“At this point we’ve grown and reached plateaus,” Walker says. “We’ve developed our infrastructure; we’ve developed our cow herd. Now we’re going to focus mainly on the importance of genetics and genetic traits to meet the market demand.” **HW**

History Runs Deep at W4 Ranch

James Walker purchased the original ranch back in 1961. It consisted roughly of 1,000 acres. At that time Joe was 13-years-old, and he recalls buying the houses, barns and fences. He remembers the houses were barely liveable and the corrals came from the old Fort Worth stockyards. They bought the cows and the horses with the land. “We started off as a working operation, but we were pretty much novices,” Joe Walker says.

As time went on James Walker grew the ranch to about 3,500 acres. They ventured into the commercial Hereford business with a ranch manager who worked on the place for 25 years. During that time, the family never purchased an outside female but produced their own by changing out the bull crop.

Their main emphasis from the start, until a few years ago, was building infrastructure and improving the water system. They had the first irrigation in the county, as Cedron Creek runs through the place. They have dammed the creek for seven miles with farmland and domestic grasses on both sides allowing for irrigation capabilities. The average cow acreage is about one cow for 15 acres, but due to irrigation they are able to put one cow per 10 acres. “Our concentration was on infrastructure, water, improving

the grasses, clearing land and building good fences,” Walker says.

In 1990 Walker started acquiring additional land and built the ranch up to 12,000 acres. The family made a substantial commitment to the Hereford industry and liquidated all of the commercial cows in 1993.

They bought cattle from several different breeders to develop their registered herd including the Watson herd out of Oklahoma that was related to K74. They also bought a great number of Weldon Edwards’ dispersal, Westmoreland Cattle, and the entire Lee Campbell herd. They established relationships with Coopers, Holdens, Churchill and with Marvin Berry.

Joe Walker says the ranch’s main objective is to produce future generations of quality Hereford cattle and future generations of quality management who can appreciate this way of life.

“This is a ranch that has tried to build a history and a heritage, but the land wasn’t inherited and the improvements didn’t come with the place,” he explains. “Everything here



W4 owners, Joey, James and Joe Walker, are active in the operation of W-4 Ranches Inc. Joey, 27, eventually wants to take over the ranch. He says his role right now is to learn all that he can from his father, grandfather and Jay, as well as other people involved in the cattle industry.

was built, bought and paid for by the families and the generations who are operating it now. Even though we don’t have a 100-year reputation, our reputation strictly comes from the people here today.” **HW**