



More Cows, Better Grass

Iowa farmer-feeders improve land and cattle in tandem.

Story & photos by **Miranda Reiman**

There's quite a legacy attached to farming the fertile land that your grandpa's grandparents did. But when you let that tradition evolve to the point where you're raising more cattle on fewer acres, more beef with fewer resources, that's when you know you've done justice to the heritage.

Just down from the small town of Garden Grove, Iowa, and over a few green hillsides is where brothers Sam and Mark Mendenhall are making that happen.

"We're the sixth generation on the farm," says Sam. "Our kids are the seventh." His son, Justin, is heading off to Iowa State University

(ISU) to get an ag degree this fall, while Mark's son, Zach, has been there, done that. Six years ago he returned to the family farm, ISU animal science degree in tow, and has since taken charge of the cattle enterprise's breeding component.

He and his wife recently had a new baby boy — perhaps he is someday destined to become the eighth generation to make his life there.

"When I was a kid we wouldn't have thought about having excess grass and being able to rent somebody else's cows," Sam says. But that's what they've done. For the past 15 years a neighboring retired farmer's herd has been managed alongside their own.

"The efficiency of our grass and the better genetics in the cattle has amazed me," he says. "Dad started with rotation. He took barbed wire and split 160 acres into 40s. Now we are using hot wires — farming the ridges and pasturing the hillsides."

What used to be a farm with cattle now centers around the livestock.

"We handle them so much more now," Sam says. "It used to be that cow herd was stuck out back and we never messed with it, but now it's kind of the hub of the whole production."

The two families combined feed about



► Brothers Sam (left) and Mark Mendenhall have turned what used to be a farm with cattle to an operation centered around the livestock.

1,200 head in small feedlots sprinkled within a couple of miles of the original farmstead.

“We’ve changed the feedlots dramatically,” Sam says. Recently, they’ve built roofs over the majority of them to help with mud and maintenance. “In the spring we’d have to get bulldozers in here, and they’d be pushing up half mud, half manure. Now we have all clean manure and that makes a big difference.”

In addition to keeping the pens in better shape, that manure is now more valuable, covering approximately 600 acres compared to the previous 100 or so.

The farm and the feedlot have a symbiotic relationship in other ways, too. Almost all the corn is marketed through the cattle, and big events like weaning happen in accordance with the crop calendar.

Managing the cow herd

Heifers calve in a tight window in February, which is growing even narrower thanks to Zach’s implementation of artificial insemination (AI).

“We thought if we could tighten them up so they all calved earlier, it would give them more time to recover and increase our rebreeding rates,” Zach says. They AI for three days, then the bulls follow for another 18 days.

Several separate groups of cows calve either in late March, April or even May.

“They have to do it on their own then, but it’s less work because they’re out on grass,” Mark says. “When we locked them up when it was colder, we were doing more harm than good.”

The weaning window is usually sandwiched between silage and corn harvest in early September, which gives the cows a boost, too.

“We push for that so that we can get the cows off and keep them in better shape before winter gets here,” Sam says. “It’s getting so expensive to feed a cow.”

Weaning time

Calves have already received their vaccines, boosters and dewormer before they move onto a starter ration in a drylot. Then they’re worked up to a finishing ration, which is including an increasingly larger percentage of ethanol byproducts.

“We’ve got a nice little circle of about 150 miles where we can pull a lot of that from. We’ll use wet distillers’, wet gluten, dry gluten, soy hulls — really whatever works in,” he says. “We have a nutritionist at the co-op who can change the ration as needed.”

When cattle are ready to market, known genetics from their own herd are usually sold by way of the value-based grid through the



► Justin Mendenhall (left) represents the seventh generation on the farm.

GeneNet Marketing Alliance, while order-bought cattle are sold live.

The latest harvest report shows 80%-90% Choice, with some loads earning 30%-40% *Certified Angus Beef*® (CAB®) brand acceptance.

“We try to pick out bulls that we know will work on the grid, something that’s got data behind them,” Mark says.

Having the carcass data from GeneNet each year aids in those decisions, Zach says.

“It gives you an idea of what your calves are doing and

maybe some things you need to improve on,” he says. “It’s also a good tool to look at seeing if you could market your cattle differently. They might not look fat, but when you get

their data in, they had a lot more backfat than you expected.”

Zach may understand carcass data better than many producers because of a three-year stint with the ISU meats lab in college.

“It was very beneficial,” he says. “We used to see a lot of poor injection sites and how they can’t use that meat. It just reinforces good handling practices.”

And so the farm that was originally homesteaded in the 1850s continues to add new knowledge and perspective with each family member who comes back. That, and a little bit of new technology, has worked out pretty well.

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