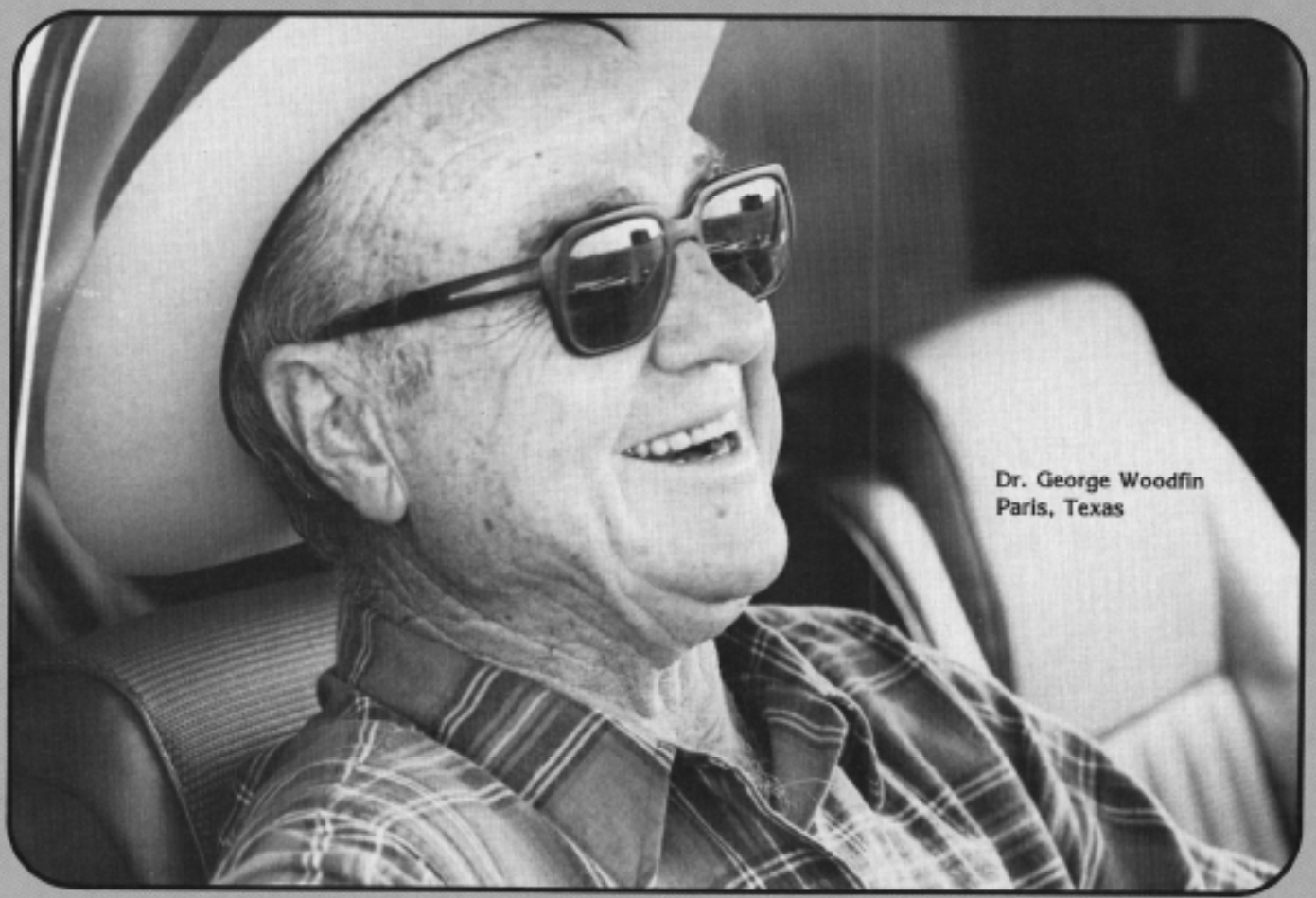
He culls strictly on performance

Tested bulls in Texas



Dr. George Woodfin
Paris, Texas

By Jim Cotton
Editor

An abiding quality of the man is his enthusiasm. Beef cattle once commanded just a few hasty notations on his busy calendar. Now, since his retirement from a demanding medical practice, Dr. George "Doc" Woodfin of Paris, Texas, pores over his herd records as carefully as he once studied lab reports and x-rays.

"We've always had some cattle around. But when I was practicing medicine, I was really pretty busy and didn't pay much attention to it.

" I'd go by eyeballin'," he says of selection in those days. "That eyeballing is a slow way to go. Now we rely on sire evaluation almost 100 percent."

"Doc" Woodfin faithfully compiled herd records since 1973, but in 1980 he began a more sophisticated and long-range program with the help of Dr. Charles McPeake of Oklahoma State University and manager of the Oklahoma BEEF Inc. testing facility at Stillwater.

Satisfying results were immediate. His first calf crop from performance-tested bulls weaned an average of 40 more pounds at weaning in contrast to the lifetime herd average. Since then, Woodfin has used nothing else in the herd but bulls from OBI or other tested sources.

Adjusted 205-day weights on the steers have climbed more than 60 pounds above the 480 figure posted in the late 1970s.

His most recent affirmation of the value of performance-tested sires comes from the Hitch Feeders II lot at Garden City, Kan., where 65 of his 1986 steers racked up an ADG of 4.2 pounds. "Dr. Hillier wrote me a letter of congratulations–said it was one of their best pens in recent years."

"Doc" selects primarily for milk, mothering ability, and growth. EPD and minimum levels for any single trait are the statistics he studies. If he "eyeballs" a bull at all, he considers a "solid conformation, not too heavy in the shoulders. I kind of like a meaty animal. I'm not much on this leg and skeletal thing. We use height to give us an idea of frame size only."

Presently, he's selecting bulls exhibiting growth but clearly offering light birthweight EPD for use on heifers. One of his choices is a son of Black Witch Corbinaire 95, a Select Sires bull. This son was purchased from H&H Ranch at Stillwater.

As he's given top money at a number of tested sales, he's often asked how he can justify paying $3,000 for the high-selling bull.

Hay and history at Woodfin's

One of the anchors of this operation over the decades is tethered to its unusual haying business. The Woodfin Brothers Ranch is a curator of sorts of the largest stand of native grassland in the state of Texas.

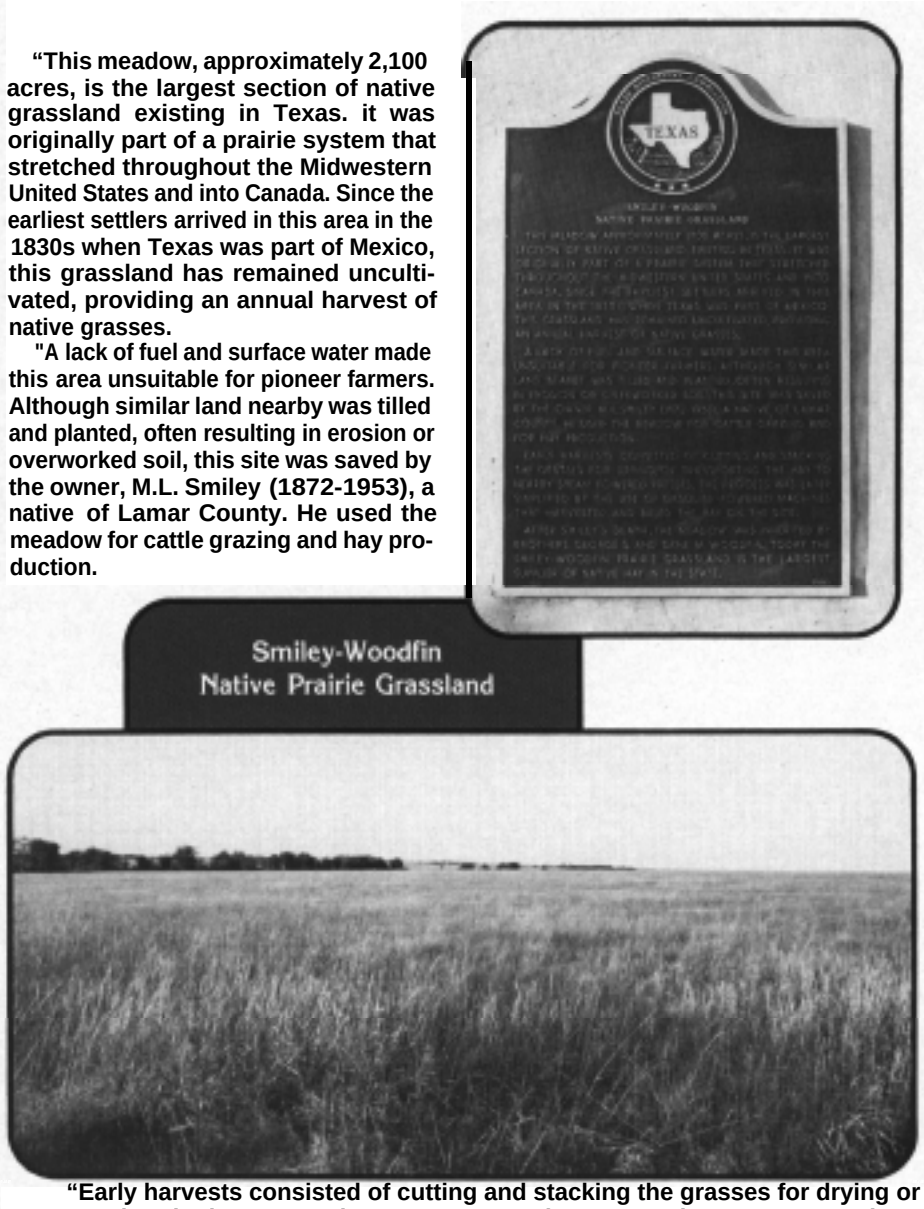
Approximately 2,100 acres are fenced and cared for-and hayed annually. The land is deeded and the brothers are not required to comply or preserve anything. "We could go in there and turn it over, but we surely wouldn't want to."

It's known officially as the Smiley-Woodfin Native Prairie Grassland. Max Smiley, uncle of the Woodfin Brothers, was primarily responsible for saving the site and developing the native hay enterprise from it. Agronomists and range students are frequent visitors taking samples and establishing plots for study.

Hay production in recent years has varied from 125,000 to 150,000 bales depending on the rainfall.

"This meadow, approximately 2,100 acres, is the largest section of native grassland existing in Texas. it was originally part of a prairie system that stretched throughout the Midwestern United States and into Canada. Since the earliest settlers arrived in this area in the 1830s when Texas was part of Mexico, this grassland has remained uncultivated, providing an annual harvest of native grasses.

"A lack of fuel and surface water made this area unsuitable for pioneer farmers. Although similar land nearby was tilled and planted, often resulting in erosion or overworked soil, this site was saved by the owner, M.L. Smiley (1872-1953), a native of Lamar County. He used the meadow for cattle grazing and hay production.



"Early harvests consisted of cutting and stacking the grasses for drying or transporting the hay to nearby steam-powered presses. The process was later simplified by the use of gasoline-powered machines that harvested and baled the hay on the site.

"After Smiley's death, the meadow was inherited by Brothers George S. and Gene M. Woodfin. Today the Smiley-Woodfin Prairie Grassland is the largest supplier of native hay in the state."

Some OBI bull purchases by Woodfin Brothers Ranch

Purchased at the October, 1986, Oklahoma BEEF Inc. sale and the highest-priced Angus lot at $3,750. He's a March, 1985, son of 3 Bar Thorr 1023 and grandson of QLC Target. Consignor-breeder was Clarence Frey, Mulhall, Okla.

A March, 1985, son of Pine Drive Big Sky consigned by Floyd Lyles, Bentonville, Ark., and sold for $1,800.

An April, 1985, son of 3 Bar Thorr 1023 and consigned by Michael Frey of Mulhall; sold for a bid of $2,900.

Dr. Woodfin also purchased some of the high-indexing bulls at the 1987 Oklahoma BEEF sale. He selected a son of Pine Drive Big Sky, DF Rage 6080, from Drake Farms, Davis, Okla., and out of a Jetliner 707 of Conanga daughter. The sale top at $5,500, the bull's station index was 111.9 with a scrotal measurement of 38.8. Third-high selling bull to Woodfin was a March son of Pine Drive Big Sky, F L Shoshone Big Sky 146, consigned by Floyd Lyles. Price was $4,500 on a bull indexing 116.2 and with an SC of 40.5.

One of the senior bulls of the herd, a Premier Progressor son out of a Shoshone-bred cow.

"That's not what you're here for," says the boss.

"How can you afford *not* to?" he responds. "If you use good bulls on 100 cows and they make you $50 more per calf, that's $5,000."

The Woodfin herd is a colorful one, the product of a wide array of sires and breeds over the years. Since 1980 however, "Doc" has confined bull power to Angus and Hereford sires selected by EPD. The 300-cow commercial operation is definitely becoming a black-baldy herd. Formerly, the Woodfin herd was largely Hereford with Simmental, Santa Gertrudis, and Charolais breeds injected in a quest for greater size. The results were hit-and-miss despite the prevalence of a lot of good-looking cows. He expected better performance.

"But then I found you could do the same and better with EPD and other records within a breed."

Distilled to a simple formula, Woodfin's theory applies the Bell Curve approach. More good bulls mean more good genes in the total herd make-up. As the cow herd steadily improves, the results should shake out 50 percent good animals, 25 percent very good, and 25 percent poor doers.

In contrast to some of his neighbors, Woodfin plans to eliminate fall calving. He wants to time his entire calf crop to drop so he can ship two good pens of steers to a custom feedlot such as Hitch's. He experienced a per-head profit of nearly $200 on that 1986 batch of 65 and naturally wants to repeat the performance. Confining the calving interval to 45 days is a big help. Still, some calves just gain enough better so it's not a perfect world.

"I like to go to Kansas with them at about 700 pounds. The lighter weights hold me up some, and while I'm waiting on them, the heavier weights slip on up to 800-850 before they get shipped."

"Doc" bought his first set of scales in 1973, and his record-keeping efforts would do credit to many registered operations. He and the other ranch personnel started packing spiral notebooks recording birthweights, sex and height of the calf, notations as to ear notching and castrating, and eventually 205-day adjusted weights. Data from the notebooks are transferred to permanent records for office use.

"We tag everything when it hits the ground. The boys give me the cow's number, the date she calved, steer or heifer, birthweight, and the height. Later, we'll take the 205-day weight and the rate of gain from 205 days to a year. There's a lot of variation in those records. I've got a long way to go, but I'm learning a whole lot from it.

"Those little notebooks are the lifeblood of our operation," "Doc" points out. "The cows live and die by them." AJ