

BROOKOVER FEEDYARD

First in Commercial Cattle Feeding

by Troy Smith



Sept. 1 nearly 1.8 million head of cattle were recorded on feed in the state of Kansas. That figure comes from the office of Kansas Livestock Statistics. At last count, 2,300 feedyards were operating in the Sunflower State.

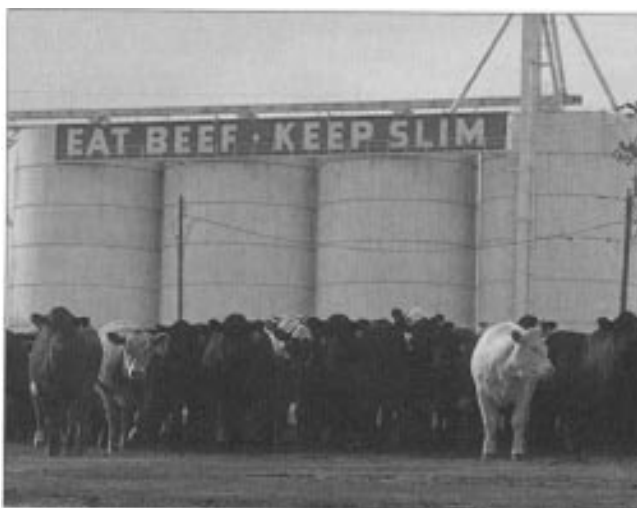
A drive through western Kansas reveals the locations of many. Along Highway 83, from Scott City to the Oklahoma line, cattle crowding fenceline bunks is a common site and feed mills tower on either horizon.

This is cattle feeding country. The flat, semi-arid region also lays claim to being the birthplace of custom cattle feeding.

The man who pioneered commercial feeding in the High Plains was Earl C. Brookover of Garden City, Kan. Brookover started feeding cattle for others in 1951 and built something of an empire before his death in 1985.

In addition to farming, ranching and cattle feeding, his business interests included real estate, oil and gas. Owned now by his four children, Brookover Companies' varied pursuits continue, but just as it was during the founder's lifetime, cattle feeding remains the core enterprise.

"Earl Brookover was a man of vision," says Jerry Riemann, feedyard operations manager for Brookover Companies. "Back in '51, he foresaw a future with vast amounts of irrigated grain growing in this region. And based on that production



Established in 1951, Brookover Feedyard, Garden City, Kan., was the first commercial feedlot in the United States. Today it's still a leader in the cattle finishing and beef marketing business.

and what he considered to be an ideal climate, he envisioned a great cattle feeding industry."

Brookover's model for custom feeding began with six pens at a site just north of Garden City. Forty-five years of growth has yielded a Brookover complex of three feedyards with combined capacity for nearly 110,000 head. Others followed his lead and as Brookover's vision became reality, the growth of High Plains cattle feeding prompted the migration of major beef packing interests to the area. Today, 20 percent of finished cattle in the United States are processed within a 50-mile radius of Brookover's Garden City facilities.

Those six pens, a dry-roller mill and a feed truck were the start of the flagship operation known as Brookover Feedyard,

Inc. The company's original office remains in use but little else resembles that humble beginning. Always on the cutting edge, Brookover adopted more sophisticated equipment as he expanded his facilities. More pens and alleys were built and Brookover leased additional facilities from neighboring farmer-feeders. Most of the leased facilities were eventually purchased and the operation now includes 300 pens with capacity for 45,000 head.

Just south of Garden City and across the Arkansas River lays an expanse of low, rolling sandhills where Brookover extended his cattle and farming operations. Here, at Brookover Ranch, 5,000 acres of cropland, including 21 center-pivot irrigation systems, were developed. Cattle grazed the

25,000 acres of native range, providing a source of supply for Brookover Feedyard. That was the ranch's original purpose and a small backgrounding yard was built in 1973 to ready feeder cattle for transfer to the finishing yard.

But increasing demand for commercial feeding services changed the emphasis and led to new construction. Brookover Ranch Feedyard became one of the most modern cattle finishing facilities in the country and now has capacity for 35,000 head.

Carrying out the founder's plans for growth and improved service, Brookover Companies expanded feeding operations again in 1992 with the purchase of Texas County Feed Yards, Inc. Established in 1965 as the first commercial feedyard in Oklahoma, Texas County has a proud heritage that parallels Brookover's. With capacity for 28,000 head, Texas County Feed Yard's Oklahoma Panhandle location also offers a temperate climate and similar access to grains, roughages and feeder cattle.

Brookover cattle feeding customers are a far-flung lot, hailing from Canada to Mexico and anywhere in between. Riemann says the economics of cattle feeding during the last couple of years have weeded out a few, but most of those were the in-and-out kind. The remaining customer base consists of producers who retain ownership of their own cattle as well as those who buy

feeder cattle for placement.

Brookover Companies procures grass-fed cattle and feeder cattle for some clients. They typically buy 450-weight cattle out of the South and Southeast for grazing on leased pasture in Texas, Oklahoma, New Mexico and Kansas.

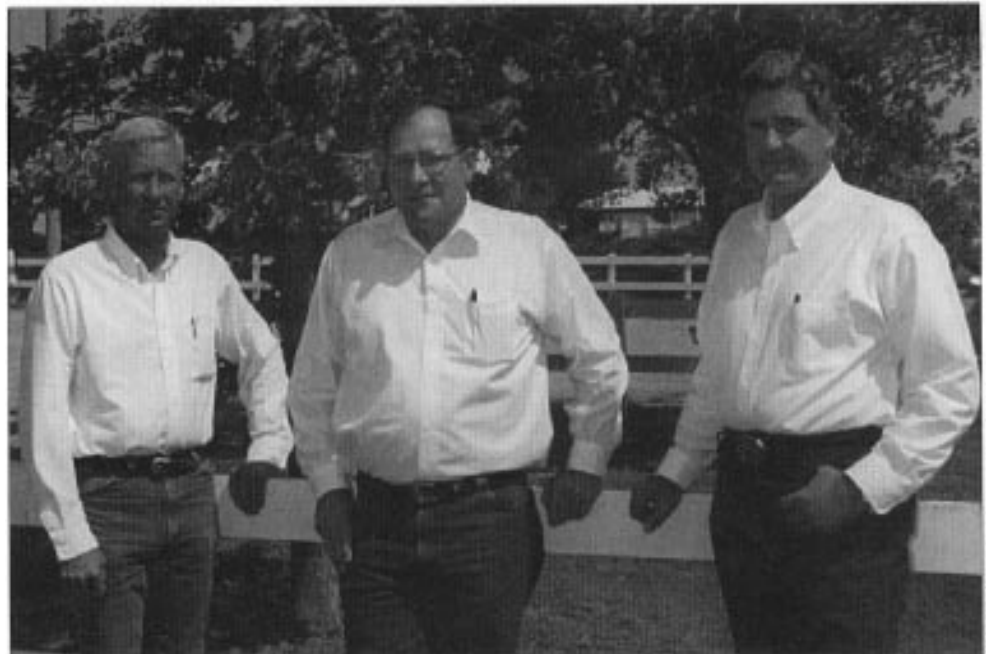
The feeder cattle then flow toward one of the three finishing yards where customer-owned cattle make up 85 to 90 percent of combined capacity.

For his role as overseer for all three feedyard locations, Jerry Riemann comes well prepared. He has been with Brookover Companies for seven years, but involved with cattle feeding since 1968. Over the years he has watched and participated in the beef industry's evolution. Riemann says everything has become more sophisticated but the most dramatic advancements may be related to preparation and movement of feed.

"One of the first big changes was going to steam-flaked grain," says Riemann. "We've become more concerned about formulating precise rations that are more consistent for moisture and anything else that affects consumption and performance. We buy a lot of grain and hay, but we're not discount buyers. We're fussy about feed ingredients so we buy better than number two corn and only dairy-quality hay."

Riemann says today's more accurately measured rations are batch-mixed at the mill rather than on a mixer-truck. He likens modern cattle ration preparation to the food portion control practiced by McDonald's. The process is computerized for consistently accurate measurement and mixing. Even the twice daily delivery feeding of cattle is managed so that delivery to the bunk never varies more than 15 minutes from the assigned time.

"We manage energy intake much more carefully than in the old days," adds Riemann. "Today's higher concentrate rations challenge cattle more



The Brookover Feedyard Inc. management team in Garden City, Kan., includes (l to r): Bob Jones, assistant manager; Jerry Riemann, feedyard operations manager; and Dan Jones, manager.

than in the past. We can work a 700-pound steer up to a high-energy finishing ration in 14 days. We're constantly looking for ways to improve performance through management. Consistent gains of 5.5 to 4 pounds per day aren't due to genetics only."

Tom Jones, who manages daily operations at Brookover Ranch Feedyard, believes Riemann's emphasis on improving cattle performance is rubbing off on the crews at all three operations.

"Jerry has turned us all into performance freaks," says Jones. "We used to get excited when feed conversions got down near six (6 pounds of feed per 1 pound of gain) but we've hit 5.75 and are shooting for 5.5. We've figured out how to manage feeding systems and minimize anything that might hurt consumption."

Consequently, the flaker is checked every hour and all measuring and mixing parameters are monitored to assure a consistent product. The cattle themselves and the feed bunks are checked four to five times each day to monitor performance. Jones says one of the few things a cattle feeder

can't manage is the weather, but he claims Riemann has Brookover employees trying to do that too.

All Brookover feedyards have increased the number of and decreased the size of their cattle pens in recent times. Riemann says that's largely due to their customers' reactions to market volatility. It used to be common for a customer to send 400 to 500 head of cattle to be finished, and then sold during a relatively short period of time. Now, the majority of Brookover customers spread out their placements. They are more likely to send 100 head one week, another 100 next week and so on, thus targeting several marketing periods.

Riemann laments the current fed cattle marketing scenario where the majority of each week's marketings occur on a single day, and most of those during a 30-minute window.

"And they all bring about the same money, regardless of quality," he adds. "I think it's just a period of transition the industry will have to go through while we solve our uniformity and consistency problems."

Riemann has seen the results of many breeders' attempts to

color their cattle black to cash in on the Angus quality perception. For too many, he says, it has been a futile attempt to improve some problems that go much deeper than hide color. Before they can deliver product that consistently satisfies the consumer, Riemann believes producers will have to identify bloodlines within breeds that offer high cutability and grade for quality too.

"There are way too many cattle of nondescript genetics," says Riemann. "It sounds pretty cold-blooded, but I think we need to get them into the feedyard, out of the genetic pool and eventually out of the system."

There have been plenty of changes since Earl Brookover fed his first pen of cattle. His innovation and leadership paved the way for the growth of commercial cattle feeding. That's why in 1989, the National Cattlemen's Association named him among the 25 individuals who made significant contributions to the U.S. beef industry. Were he alive today, it's likely he'd acknowledge the industry has come far, but many challenges remain.