

The All-Around Feedlot Gal

Thomas County Feeders' cattle clerk could run a swing shift out of the office.

Story & photos by Miranda Reiman

Rachel Smith is a good hand around a feedyard. She can wash tanks and work in the mill. She knows how to doctor cattle, process arrivals and read bunks.

She puts all that experience to work at Thomas County Feeders, Colby, Kan., where her actual position is full-time cattle clerk. That means she also handles all of the “natural” paperwork and deals in customer service, too.

Although she spends most of her time in the office nowadays, Smith started out doing pretty much every job in the feeding industry, and she still reads bunks once or twice a week.

“I bet there aren't 1% of the cattle clerks in the United States who can do that,” says manager Mike Hunter. “It's very, very rare.”

A bigger purpose

Dedication to detail usually comes with the clerk job description, but Smith goes above and beyond, perhaps because she sees a bigger purpose in her everyday work.

“My favorite part of the job is talking to the producers,” says Smith, a Goodland, Kan., native. “It's fun talking to guys with cattle from California to Florida and hearing the differences, but we are all trying to get to the same goal.



► Thomas County Feeders' Rachel Smith earned the title of 2010 Quality Assurance Officer of the Year.

“They'll call us and ask how their cattle are doing,” she says. “We are able to give them their data back and answer their questions. We help them improve their herd, and it helps us all make a profit.”

It's that commitment to the Certified Angus Beef LLC (CAB) core philosophy, along with an exceptional work record, that earned the title 2010 Quality Assurance (QA)

Officer of the Year. The award, which dates back to 2000, is chosen from employees among nearly 70 CAB-licensed yards nationwide.

Smith's enthusiasm is infectious, but it's the combination of optimism and get-down-to-business that makes her extremely effective and efficient, Hunter says.

“She is happy-go-lucky, but when it comes to her paperwork, she is serious,” he says. “We'll get a new load of cattle in and before I even have time to look at them, she's got their paperwork on my desk wanting me to sign it.”

On top of the paperwork

That became an increasingly important part of Smith's role after the yard switched to 100% natural production in 2006.

“The paperwork is a lot more intense,” she says. As cattle enter the yard, she checks their affidavits and tracks down any missing information with the producer.

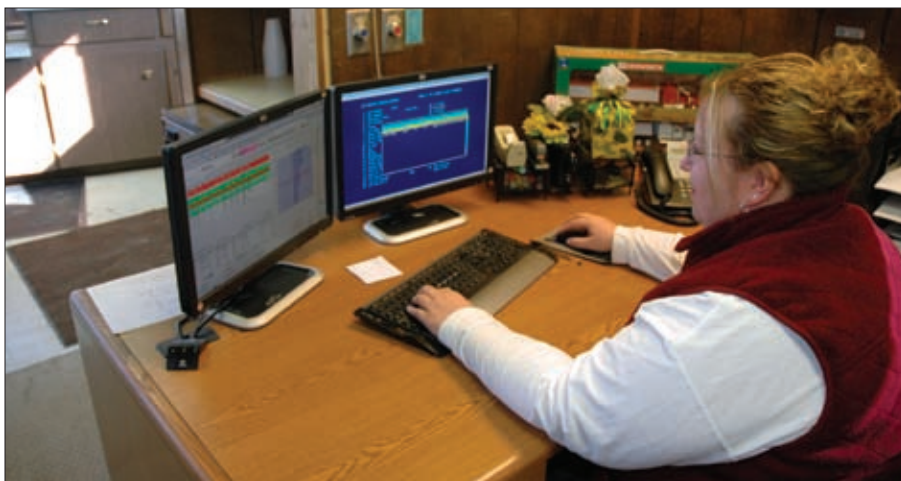
“We are really good about making sure everything is signed daily and filled in as we do it,” Smith says. “We want the buyers to see it takes a lot of extra work, but we're doing it to provide the best beef we can.”

Everything is kept in order with color-coded files, lists and lots of double-checking

CONTINUED ON PAGE 114



► Rachel Smith's enthusiasm is infectious, but it's the combination of optimism and get-down-to-business that makes her extremely effective and efficient, says Mike Hunter, feedyard manager.



►“I hate waiting on paperwork, so I hate making people wait for me,” Smith says.

— a system that has passed every U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) audit to date.

“She’s very good at it, and many times we’ve heard comments that we’re at the top as far as our paperwork is concerned,” Hunter says.

The yard foreman enrolls cattle in the CAB program, but Smith takes it from there. She requests packing-plant data and sends pen closeouts to the Manhattan, Kan., CAB office within days of shipping.

“I hate waiting on paperwork, so I hate making people wait for me,” she says.

Although Smith seems like a natural fit for her current position, she didn’t plan a career in the beef industry. Her first livestock experience came from time on her grandmother’s farm and showing cattle in 4-H. Then she went to Panhandle State University in Guymon, Okla., for agronomy. That’s where her path crossed with that of Hunter, who was managing nearby Texas County Feedyard at the time.

“I started in the office there and asked to try some of the other spots,” Smith says. So she was moved from processing to the vet barn to the mill and driving a feed truck. “I kind of fell in love with the beef industry because it wasn’t the same thing every day,” she says.

The Oklahoma experience made life easier when she moved north. “I can understand where the cowboys are coming from when they talk about the animals and where the mill guys are coming from on the feed,” Smith says.

Hunter knew her as a loyal employee and was eager to find a spot for her when she applied at Thomas County. She’s been there nine years.

“You can’t have changeover in a position like hers,” Hunter says. “Consistency is the key, and you can’t train somebody to do everything Rachel does. She has learned a lot and picked up stuff on her own.

“She’s not a clock-watching person,” he continues. “She is here when she needs to be and doesn’t leave until she’s done.”

That typically means coming in at 7 a.m. and posting feed and vet charges from the day before — unless it’s those days she’s reading bunks, when her day will start even earlier. After that Smith sorts through harvest data, matches it up with closeouts, fields customer questions, and keeps up on all the other details.

“She fits in real well. She’s always smiling and chipper,” Hunter says. “She can deal with millionaire customers on their level, and she can turn around and talk to our tank washer five minutes later.”

And she regularly does.

“I always love learning, so I’m talking to these guys, and I learn a little bit more every day,” she says. “If you stop learning, you stop growing, so I always want to learn.”

That’s just one more example of the attitude that makes Smith a walking definition of “good help,” and a truly great guardian of quality for her yard and the CAB program.

“She’s very good at it, and many times we’ve heard comments that we’re at the top as far as our paperwork is concerned.”
— Mike Hunter

