

Family Legacy Fosters Success



Woodbury Farms wins BIF Commercial Producer of the Year Award.

Story & photos by **Nicole Lane**, editorial intern

If the founder of Woodbury Farms, Fred H., could see the place today, he would definitely have a smile on his face. Although the original headquarters of the operation lies beneath Melvern Reservoir and the cows are now black-hided, what his great-grandsons have been able to do with his homestead and cattle has earned them national attention.

At the Beef Improvement Federation (BIF) Annual Convention in Biloxi, Miss., in June, brothers John and Howard Woodbury won the Commercial Producer of the Year Award and a trophy so large they didn't know how they were going to get it home. Preferring to let the cattle speak for themselves, the family was surprised and humbled by the recognition of the award.

"I think there's a lot of people with good cattle," Howard says, "but it's the people behind the cattle that make the difference."

One of four finalists for the award, the Woodburys were nominated by the Kansas Livestock Association. Applicants were evaluated based on their operation's short- and long-term goals, performance



► Brothers John and Howard, and Howard's son, Evan Woodbury, are the men behind nationally-recognized Woodbury Farms. Together, they work to produce high-quality Angus bulls and commercial cattle.

and economic recordkeeping and analysis, breeding and selection programs, culling criteria, marketing, forage resource stewardship and involvement in the cattle industry.

Improving it all

Located in Osage County, Kan., Woodbury Farms is an oasis in the Flint Hills. About 400 black-hided spring-calving cows roam its pastures. One-third of the cows are

registered-Angus and the other two-thirds are commercial cattle with Angus-influenced genetics. The Woodburys have emphasized doing more with less, focusing on improving their genetics, recordkeeping and rangeland management, and reducing labor costs.

They have made a name for themselves at the local sale barn where they market their cattle. After backgrounding for 90 days, steers are sold through the sale barn. A minimum of one-third of the heifer calves are retained

in the herd. The remaining heifers are backgrounded and sold at the annual production sale.

“Our cattle have a reputation at that sale barn,” John says. “They sell well, and they don’t always go to the same buyer because we have several people interested in purchasing them.”

A small number of their cattle are entered each year into the Flint Hills Beef Fest Contest, in which they are finished in a commercial feedyard and carcass data is collected. The brothers use this data to make selection decisions in their herd and to determine where improvements need to be made from the carcass perspective.

“We’ve used this data to change our genetics to better fit our environment and what the consumer wants,” John says. “It was through this carcass data that we were able to determine our ribeyes weren’t where they needed to be, so we adjusted our selection criteria.”

Accidentally Angus seedstock

Twenty-five years ago their herd was 95% straightbred Hereford, but when Howard returned from college, they introduced an Angus bull. The change in genetics was a success, and today a vast majority of their bull battery is Angus.

Although recognized for their commercial operation, the Woodburys also have a seedstock portion of their herd that started when Howard’s son Evan wanted to show cattle. Thinking they could raise show cattle, Howard bought five registered-Angus cow-calf pairs. As the registered herd grew, he realized show cattle weren’t his niche. However, when his cows produced 19 registered bulls out of 23 calves, it seemed they chose the seedstock business for him. Howard sold the bulls private treaty, and before long the family was participating in an annual production sale.

“I didn’t really get into it with a plan,” Howard says. “We just had a boy who wanted to show and ended up with more bulls than I knew what to do with.”

The registered genetics have supplemented their commercial herd, allowing them to make increased progress in their ribeye size, mothering ability, growth and carcass quality.

Herd building changes

Hide color isn’t the only thing that has changed. They have worked to graze their cattle year-round using a combination of warm-season grasses, cool-season grasses, crop residue and stockpiled brome.



PHOTO BY TROY SMITH

► Woodbury Farms, Quenemo, Kan., was named the 2015 Beef Improvement Federation Commercial Producer of the Year during an awards ceremony June 9 at the Beau Rivage Resort and Casino in Biloxi, Miss. Pictured at the awards ceremony are (from left) Wes Ishmael, *BEEF* magazine, award sponsor; Howard Woodbury; and John Woodbury.

They supplement the cattle as needed with homegrown hay, making use of family land and refraining from renting pasture.

“We have reduced the amount of hay we feed in our operation to get more out of our resources,” says Howard. “We graze 12 months out of the year and have moved to unrolling hay for the cattle in order to not let any of it go to waste.”

As the farm has continued to increase in size, the Woodburys have decreased their labor costs. In the mid 1980s, the farm had as many as six full-time employees. Now, they have no full-time hired labor and contract extra help only as needed to work or move cattle.

“We do things with a lot less labor than we did 20 to 25 years ago,” Howard says.

Recordkeeping and identification has also

been an essential improvement for the family.

“We identify all our cows, even our commercial cattle, and we have a track record on production for a cow, not only fertility but actual weights of what she has produced,” Howard explains. They then use the information to select replacements.

Progress continues

With a history of tradition behind them, the Woodburys remain focused on the future, continuing their operation for the generations to come. John shares, “The overall goal of our operation is to be a profitable, sustainable family organization that will be around for generations to come.”

Next spring, the family will be looking to make a few more adjustments in their operation as Evan will graduate from Kansas State University and return to the ranch. A current National Junior Angus Board member, he will be the fifth generation of Woodburys to work cattle on the land and continue the legacy of Woodbury Farms.

The recent recognition is assurance that the Woodburys have a tradition of excellence, one they hope to continue.

“I’m really just so honored that we won it,” Howard says, “It means a lot to me and my brother because of our family heritage. It’s not just our award. It’s awarding what my grandfather and father did before us, and hopefully it’s indicative of what my son will do when he is a part of the operation.”

