

Relationships Rule

Will Feed values ranchers and their cattle.

Story & photos by **Miranda Reiman**

It wasn't a typical weekend trip home from college. Anne Burkholder and her husband of less than a year traveled from Dartmouth — an Ivy League college in Hanover, N.H. — to the quaint Platte River Valley town of Cozad, Neb. Matt was closing in on a master's degree, Anne her undergraduate degree, and they were looking to buy a house and put down roots.

The couple considered careers in Chicago or other Midwestern cities, but the Burkholder family's diversified farming and feedlot operation was calling.

They met with the family and soon-to-be business partners at a local café.

"When we told Matt's dad that we wanted to come back, he about dropped his coffee cup," Anne recalls. "But the double surprise was when Matt said, 'Anne wants to try to work at the feedyard.'"

Dave Burkholder laughed.

But he wasn't about to tell his daughter-in-law "no." After all, good help is hard to find, and he could use another hand at Will Feed Inc., the 3,000-head yard he'd built in the early 1970s.



► As manager of Will Feed Inc., CAB's Feedlot Partner of the Year for lots with fewer than 15,000 head, Anne Burkholder is shooting for a niche where calves are traceable from ranch to rail.

"It took a tremendous leap of faith to give a job to a 22-year-old woman who had no background in agriculture," she reflects. "But he didn't give me the manager job right from the start. I went to work for \$6.85 an hour, running the feedtruck, scooping bunks and processing cattle."

Feedlot Partner of the Year
<15,000 head



Traceable niche

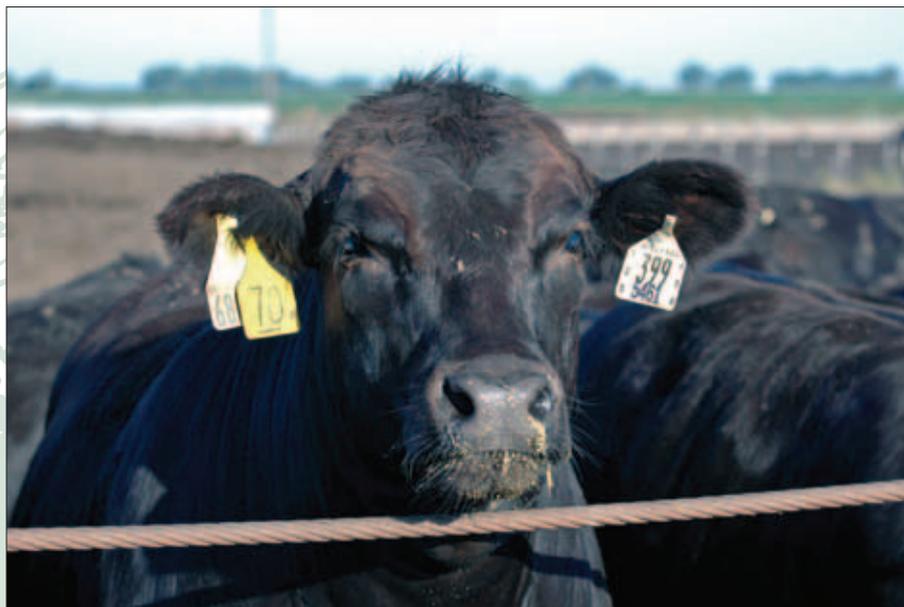
As manager today, she still does most of those tasks.

"I don't ask anybody to do things that I won't do myself," Burkholder says.

Perhaps it's because she's a woman in a male-dominated field. Maybe it's her Florida "city girl" roots. It could be her perspective as a mother or her psychology degree. Likely it's all that rolled into one, but whatever the impetus, Burkholder has made many changes at the feedyard and within the greater beef industry.

One of the more recent developments came when Will Feed signed on as a Certified Angus Beef LLC (CAB)-licensed feedlot in 2008. The overriding quality focus, data-gathering and details management took hold long before, but those characteristics became increasingly apparent.

They helped earn recognition as the 2011 CAB Feedlot Partner of the Year for operations with up to 15,000-head capacity.



► There are times when the yard is 100% full of Nebraska-born, age- and source-verified calves.

CONTINUED ON PAGE 108

Relationships Rule CONTINUED FROM PAGE 107

Matt and Anne accepted the award at the CAB annual conference in Sunriver, Ore., Sept. 22-24.

"The niche we've really tried to get into is tracing calves from ranch to rail," Burkholder says. "I've tried to build up a base of producers that want to trace their calves."

That's a stark contrast to the business model of a few decades ago. Like most feedyards then, the Will Feed calves were sale-barn bought by third-party order buyers.

"I like to work with people, and I think we can be vertically collaborative a lot easier if we just talk to each other," she says, careful to distinguish between cooperation and "vertical integration."

"There are lots of different ways to put the puzzle together. The trick is to find what works for each person," Burkholder says. "I've got ranchers who do things differently, but that doesn't matter. Together we can figure out a way to make their program work here."

A good home

She'd dreamed of a business plan where she was the only "middleman" between ranch and packer, where information sharing was easy and worthwhile. Then eight or nine years ago, the oil market gave her an additional incentive to give that a try.

"I got tired of paying freight," Burkholder says. "About the time I wanted to go out and start buying my own calves, freight doubled."

Rather than pay several hundred extra dollars to truck in a calf from Idaho or down South, she tapped into the local pool of high-quality genetics.

"I can give a good chunk of that money to the rancher instead of putting it into freight," she says. It's also a stress-reducer for the animals.

She started working the connections she'd made from involvement on Nebraska Cattlemen committees. Those initial "local" customers told their neighbors. The list grew, and today there are times when the yard is

100% full of Nebraska-born, age- and source-verified calves.

Many of them are Angus, and they're all sold on the U.S. Premium Beef (USPB) grid.

Pat Laird, who lives just a few miles down the road from the feedyard, starting selling his calves to Burkholder in 2002.

"It's been a good relationship," he says. "She's very conscientious about their environment, and I like how she treats the cattle when they're there. It's a good home when they leave my home."

True to form, Burkholder gives Laird all the feedlot and individual carcass data.

"I can know where my herd's at, down to every cow," he says. "I can make management decisions based on that."

They discuss bull choices and other strategies to keep inching up his already-solid cattle. A load of 114 head in 2009 achieved better than 40% *Certified Angus Beef*® (CAB®) brand and CAB Prime acceptance.

In late October, the calves are trucked just

The perfect pedigree for an 'agvocate'

Anne Burkholder is the daughter of an English teacher, and her brother is a professional writer, so penning prose is in her blood. By marriage and career choice, she's got something else running through those veins, too: agriculture.

Harking back to her start as an "outsider" in the cattle-feeding business, she uses that perspective to provide an insider's look for those who want to know how their food was raised.

When she won the National Beef Quality Assurance award in 2009, Burkholder received media training and made several appearances at consumer events across the country.

"I still remember back to where I didn't really know where my food came from," she says, recalling her childhood in West Palm Beach, Fla. "And, really, when I was a kid nobody worried about it, either. We're pretty blessed in our society today that we're not worried about whether or not there is food on the table; we're worried about where it comes from."

"That said, I think the consumer has a right to know," she continues. "Transparency is really important."

Burkholder opens up Will Feed, the family-owned feedyard she manages near Cozad, Neb., for tours, but now she's increasing the visibility with a blog she started earlier this year.

"Feedyard Foodie (feedyardfoodie.wordpress.com)" is her way of putting a face on the feedyard.

"I'm not a factory farmer, and I've had people call me that to my face," she says. "When you think about it, what's that bad about a factory? Nothing really, but the way the media portrays it, it's become this horrible, evil, soul-wrenching thing."

So she shared a story related to that in a recent post.

"My CAFO houses cattle who are cared for by people. There is no mechanized 'factory' that accomplishes this," she writes, continuing on with tales of her family.

Readers are greeted by many close-up pictures of cattle; of

daughters Ashley Grace, Megan and Karyn; and even nostalgic shots from growing up or college years.

"It's giving me an outlet for writing and is allowing me to positively share my story," Burkholder says. "And I can do that from my house."

"I try to find some common ground so we can define ranch terms by something that we all understand," she adds. "I'm not out there to preach; that's not me. They may not agree with me, but at least they can understand and have a good source of accurate information."



► Customer Pat Laird says he likes the way Burkholder treats his cattle. "She's very conscientious about their environment, and I like how she treats the cattle when they're there. It's a good home when they leave my home," he says.

a few miles from his town-side pasture to the feedyard, where they're weaned. That's a pretty common story for Will Feed suppliers.

"Weaning a calf through the feedyard is not the most fun thing in the world to do, but through a real focus on the minute details, we've come up with a plan that really works,"

Burkholder says. "We do all the little things right. My feedtruck driver talks to my cowboy, and if somebody doesn't get to the bunk that day, we make sure we get them looked at. We exercise and acclimate our calves when they come in."

Exercise may conjure up images of huffing and puffing, sweat and treadmills, but in the cattle world it's a calm process, if done right.

"I walk into a pen and I group them, because there's 100 of them and one of me," says Burkholder, who usually ventures out at dawn to work the cattle herself. "I use alternate pressure to ask them to move in straight lines. Then they exit the pen, go down the alleyway, and I take them to the main corral."

Another key is teaching them to "park," or stop when they get to a fence.

"A lot of cattle I get are not really used to being handled on foot, so I want them to get confident and comfortable with that," she says. Their reward for this learned teamwork? The feedtruck delivers breakfast while they're out and about.

"You can tell when you get to the end of the acclimation process that they have found comfort in the home pen, because they're not nearly as excited to leave," Burkholder says.

Typically this goes on for five to seven days, and during that time they're being fed mostly prairie hay with "just a touch" of wet distillers' on top. Gradually that gives way to a calf ration and then to the normal receiving diet, followed by a series of finishing rations.

Nothing gets an implant until it's been there for 30 days.

"That's really important for quality grade," Burkholder says. "When you implant an animal and they're under stress, your implant isn't as effective, and it can impede the animal's ability to marble."

Coordinated approach

Health programs are all coordinated, with vaccinations usually at the ranch because that's when they work best, she says. Most of the time initial processing consists of a respiratory shot, along with injectable dewormers and pour-on lice control.

Everybody, from suppliers to consulting nutritionists and veterinarians, knows Burkholder's end goal.

"I want to produce something that tastes good and something that's tender," she says.

"Beef is not inexpensive, so it's something that a lot of people have to sacrifice to put on the dinner table. For the overall good of our industry long-term, we need to be striving for quality up and down the chain."

— Anne Burkholder

"Beef is not inexpensive, so it's something that a lot of people have to sacrifice to put on the dinner table. For the overall good of our industry long-term, we need to be striving for quality up and down the chain."

So there's the greater good, plus a monetary benefit.

"Even when the Choice-Select spread isn't very big, if you can get your animals to go CAB, that's a really nice kicker," she says.

At Will Feed, that's a regular occurrence. From June 2010 to May 2011, more than 1,300 head enrolled in CAB's Feedlot-Licensing Program (FLP) went 59.8% CAB and CAB Prime.

Burkholder earns source and age premiums on top of grading bonuses.

"I like that program because it enables us to get a premium for something that is really just a good management practice, plus it doesn't penalize me for using technology," she says. "We need to grow safe, high-quality, wholesome beef using the fewest resources, so I use growth hormones."

Burkholder conveys her commonsense approach to non-ag audiences (see sidebar) and has become an "agvocate" who puts a face on the feeding segment.

"I want to put good content out there so people can understand what I do every day," she says.

The cattlemen and packers she works with already understand what it is that she does: build relationships that turn calves into profitable beef products. In short, she satisfies consumers, while bringing home the bucks.



► Tired of paying freight to source calves from miles away, Burkholder opted to pay local producers more for their pool of high-quality genetics.



► Everyone pays attention to cattle care at Will Feed, Burkholder says. "We do all the little things right. My feedtruck driver talks to my cowboy, and if somebody doesn't get to the bunk that day, we make sure we get them looked at. We exercise and acclimate our calves when they come in."