

Parker Ranch: Maintaining the Legacy

by Kim Holt



PHOTOS COURTESY OF PARKER RANCH

Some 40 miles north of Kona International Airport, upland from the surf and sea, is the hub of Big Island ranch country and the home of the historic and highly respected Parker Ranch.

Parker ranchlands surround the community of Waimea (also known as Kamuela), and spread between the Kohala and Mauna Kea mountains. Today just 12 paniolos — Hawaiian cowboys — carry out Parker Ranch cattle activities, with support from another crew of nine who work on ranch and facility maintenance.

These paniolos have their work cut out for them. Parker is the fifth-largest cow-calf ranch in the U.S. and manages 15,000 mother cows on some 130,000 acres.

A storybook past

Parker Ranch's storied past goes back to 1809, the year that its founder, 19-year-old John Palmer Parker, jumped ship onto the shores of the Big Island.

As the story unfolds, Parker was befriended by Hawaii's King Kamehameha I, who was

impressed with his enthusiasm and vision — so much so that the king later allowed Parker to hunt the herds of maverick cattle that had overpopulated the island. These animals were descendants from a gift of five head given to Kamehameha in the late 1790s.

Parker did well for himself. He traded beef, tallow and hides to visiting ships and locals, married the king's granddaughter, purchased two acres of royal land for \$10 and was later gifted 640 acres. Parker and his wife, Kipikane, chose a parcel located about 12 miles from what is now Waimea to establish, in 1847, what would become the Parker Ranch dynasty.

The Parker's ranch grew and was a diversified operation that included cattle, dairy, poultry and pork production in its early years. Alfred Wellington Carter signed on as ranch manager in 1899 and during his 50-year tenure introduced Herefords and Thoroughbreds to Parker Ranch, built fences and established water systems.

"He really did a lot of upgrades," comments Corky Bryan, Parker Ranch's vice president of livestock operations. "He was an entrepreneur-type of guy."

Parker of today

Carter's foresight and advancements continue to benefit the ranch today. Its water system includes 175 miles of pipeline, four large reservoirs, 145 water tanks, three water dams and 650 water troughs. The ranch has more than 300 paddocks, 850 miles of fence and 15 corrals.

Breed-wise the Parker cattle program has evolved from being the largest straight-Hereford operation in the world to a three-way cross of Hereford, Brangus and Angus to now an Angus-based herd.

Parker started to do more crossbreeding with black Angus in the mid-1980s. This is when ranch management became more serious about making this breed their maternal base, largely due to added marketability and fewer eye problems.

To further increase marketability, the ranch added Charolais as a terminal cross on about one-third — or 5,000 — of the Angus-based commercial cows and, in the 1990s, began calving in two seasons. This allows them to take advantage of both winter and summer grass seasons on the Big Island and to correlate with mainland grazing, Bryan says.

Before shipping calves to the mainland,



►**Above:** As Hawaii's largest cattle producer and the fifth-largest cow-calf operation in the U.S., Parker Ranch includes three operating divisions: livestock and ranching, visitor, and land and assets. It employs around 51 employees, 23 in the livestock division. Its visitor's arm offers guests ranch, horseback, ATV and historic homes tours. Hunting and wildlife are also available as part of the livestock division. Blanketed with snow in the background is Mauna Kea, the highest mountain in the world if elevation is measured from the ocean floor. For more information, visit www.parkerranch.com.

Parker was the major stockholder in the former Hawaii Meat Co., a vertically integrated feedyard, harvest, processing and retail beef sales operation located in Honolulu.

Bryan worked for Parker Ranch there, first as feedlot manager and then as the operation's general manager. He later was moved to the Big Island to set up and oversee the shipping and marketing of Parker Ranch cattle to the mainland. Some 10,000 to 12,000 head have been annually exported off the island since 1991.

These calves start arriving Oct. 15 in fall and April 15 in spring. Because of sheer numbers, Parker paniolos brand calves at weaning, the same time they process. All calves are electronically tagged and source- and age-verified. "Our cattle can go anywhere in the world," Bryan confirms, "and they're also natural."

Weaning takes place in April-May and October-November. Different from the mainland, the Hawaiian ranches like Parker are worried very little about weaning weight. They shoot to wean a 400-pound (lb.) calf, except in dry conditions.

"We turn the whole paradigm of weaning a big calf upside down because we want to get the weight on over there (mainland), not here," Bryan explains. "Most of the forages here can't support a young calf."

This is one reason why they strive to ship four-weight calves to the mainland within a month to 60 days of weaning. Shipping costs are another factor.

Parker calves are exported twice a year to West Coast ports: in April through June and in December. Calves have been transported to the mainland via livestock ship, "cowtainers" and air freight.

Bryan says that transportation means can change; they depend on the end location of the calves and what the best shipping option is at the time.

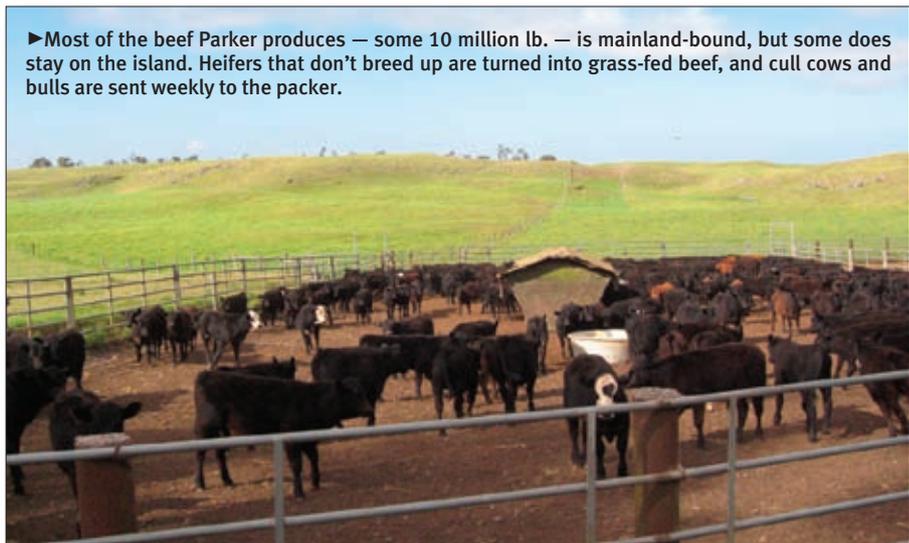
The Hawaii Cattle Producers Cooperative Association, of which Parker is a member, now has enough cowtainers, Bryan says, and the cost of air freight has come down in price, both of which are more favorable for Parker vs. commissioning a livestock ship.

Calves exported this past spring to Texas were actually airfreighted as a backhaul out of the Kona Air Terminal. These calves landed in Los Angeles and were in Hereford, Texas, within 24 hours after leaving the Big Island. Calves destined for Oregon are shipped in cowtainers.

About 40% of Parker calves are finished in Texas in Parker co-owned feedlots for the Ranchers Renaissance program. The balance are finished in Boardman, Ore., at Beef Northwest Feeders for the Country Natural Beef program. Because these vertically integrated programs differ in specs and



►The ranch's 15,000 mother cows are kept in herds that average 600-800 head. Corky Bryan says in order to best utilize grass, "every animal is on some kind of move, sometimes every two to three days or every couple of weeks." Parker ranchlands average about 30 inches (in.) of rainfall, ranging from 10 to 80 in. Bryan says their best country will support one cow per 2.2 acres.



►Most of the beef Parker produces — some 10 million lb. — is mainland-bound, but some does stay on the island. Heifers that don't breed up are turned into grass-fed beef, and cull cows and bulls are sent weekly to the packer.

location, they increase marketing flexibility for Parker. They also reward this ranch for the added value of its genetics, health and management practices.

Bryan believes that taking cattle to the feed, rather than feed to the cattle, has proven to be a better option for them. But either way, transportation is one of their biggest challenges, and so are government regulations.

Accelerating genetic progress

The acclimatization of herd sires to the Big Island's differing climates has also proved challenging in the past, so ranches like Parker have their own purebred herds from which to breed and raise herd bulls and purebred replacement heifers. Parker maintains a 300-head bull battery, which they use twice a year.

In 2002 this ranch started exclusively



►The acclimatization of herd sires to the Big Island's differing climates is challenging, so ranches like Parker, Kahua and Ponoholo have their own purebred herds from which to raise purebred Angus and Charolais herd bulls and replacements.

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breeding their 350 purebred black Angus and 100 Charolais females by artificial insemination to help accelerate genetic progress. They had started breeding up their purebred Angus herd in the mid-1980s through the Angus-Hereford cross; Parker started in the Charolais business in the early 1990s, when they bought a herd that dispersed in the islands.

All dams are synchronized, artificially bred once and turned out with cleanup bulls. “We’re able to get all of the replacement bulls out of there so all bulls in our commercial herds are the product of AI (artificial insemination),” Bryan reports. “You can really control genetics through the use of AI,” he says.

“Since starting our AI program, it’s amazing how our carcass quality has increased,” — and rapidly, he points out. He says they went from 50% Choice to 60%-70%, and had some groups closing out this year at 90%.

Parker receives group data for all cattle they feed through the two branded beef programs. They also track individual data on calves culled from the purebred herds; these cattle are fed utilizing Decatur County Feed Yard’s Electronic Cattle Management system in Oberlin, Kan.

As Bryan points out, “We have to keep ahead of the curve.” He says their goal is to keep their cow herd moderate in size, not too

small or with too much milk. In working condition, their cows will weigh from 900 lb. to 1,100 lb. Both their genetics and environment will allow them to get bigger, but they don’t want or need to, he says. Selection-wise they focus on calving ease, carcass quality and yearling weight.

The average Parker cow group is 600-800 head. The smallest herd is 225 head; the largest, 1,200 head. Bryan says, in order to best utilize grass, “every animal is on some kind of move, sometimes every two to three days or every couple of weeks,” and they do practice intensive grazing in some paddocks.

Bryan explains they’re constantly at work to reduce the size of these pastures to 500-600 acres in order to better utilize grass and manage cattle. But with 130,000 acres, this is an ongoing process that takes water development and fence building, just for starters.

About 70% of Parker’s grazing lands lie at 1,500-5,500 feet (ft.) above sea level, about the same elevation at which the warm-season kikukyu grass grows best. This drought-resistant, aggressive plant is a primary forage base for Big Island ranchers, even though it’s better feed for cows.

An enduring legacy

Bryan believes that Parker Ranch’s history is what makes it unique among ranches of its size. “That, and the fact we’ve been able to keep it together for 162 years. We keep its history and legacy in mind as we do things,” he assures.

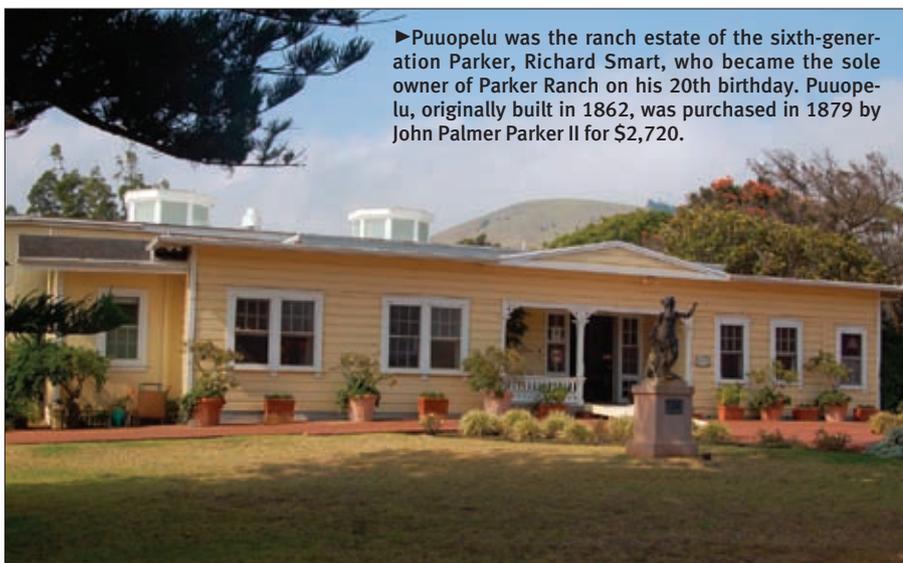
The ranch has gone through many changes, he says, but it’s been able to maintain itself through ownership from sole proprietorship to a foundation trust.

In 1992 Richard Smart, the great-great-grandson of John Palmer Parker and the sole owner of the ranch, died, leaving ownership to the Parker Ranch Foundation Trust. Smart created the trust to benefit health care, education and charitable organizations in the community of Waimea/Kamuela.

“Size isn’t everything, but it helps,” Bryan comments. He says staying up with current science and technology helps this historic ranch stay on the cutting edge.

“We started doing eID (electronic identification) four years ago,” he points out, for example. “We didn’t want to have 12,000 calves and nowhere to go with them.”

Bryan continues, “Alfred Carter was a tremendous visionary who set the tone for keeping up with technology and changes within the livestock industry. Maintaining that legacy, in my opinion, is really the most important thing.”



►Puuopelu was the ranch estate of the sixth-generation Parker, Richard Smart, who became the sole owner of Parker Ranch on his 20th birthday. Puuopelu, originally built in 1862, was purchased in 1879 by John Palmer Parker II for \$2,720.

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