



Inside and Out: Conception to Consumption with Pasture-Fat Shorthorn Cattle By Kathy Peth

All American pioneers came from somewhere else, and they brought their barn styles, their farming practices, and their cattle with them. Before this country was a decade old, a mahogany-red (or roan or white), compact dual-purpose cow was comfortably eating marsh hay in colonial barnyards, providing milk, meat, and power for the settlers' field work.

The Shorthorn had come from the far north of England and was sometimes known by the name of its home county of Durham. After spreading to Scotland, the breed traveled on ships to the new United States. Shorthorn ancestry, both horned and polled, helped establish such American-blended breeds as the Santa Gertrudis and Beefmaster, and traces of Shorthorn vigor show up in other breeds, from Angus to Maine-Anjou.



Only a few generations ago, Shorthorn dairy herds were common, and many a diversified farmer kept one around for a house cow. But commercial Shorthorn cattle fell out of favor in the 1980's gallop toward giant, lean carcasses. Feeders complained they got too fat too fast. Shorthorns became a niche breed, genetics for crossbreeding.

The American Shorthorn Assn. (ASA) now shows a healthy annual increase in recorded registrations, and the cattle are being selected for their growth and carcass traits as well as their well-known maternal traits.

The breed has found a proponent in the partnership of Oregon cattlemen Don Wilkinson and Harold Boucock. As Adams Creek Ranch, they are developing a marketing program to sell beef directly to the consumer, and they're using Shorthorns to do it.

Both Wilkinson and Boucock had experience with the breed, and when calving problems encouraged them to look for a change in their original herd, they investigated the modern Shorthorn as a solution. The original plan had been to use a registered bull or two in their herd for hybrid vigor and an injection of calving ease and disposition. Their research, and the cattle Wilkinson found at Dennis Pluth's in Clear Lake Oaks, Calif., encouraged them to buy a couple of cow-calf pairs as well, and then some heifers.

The Adams Creek herd is now about two-thirds registered Shorthorns, using bulls from Don Cardy, Dan Burton, and Butch and Sharon Kasper. The new bull from the Kaspers is an Improver 57 grandson, one of the breed's top carcass bulls. The ranch is developing a consumer base for their hormone- and antibiotic-free beef, finished to low choice entirely on pasture and/or grass products. They also sell traditional commercial feeders.

Wilkinson's carefully recorded numbers prove the partnership's straight Shorthorn cattle are as growthy and vigorous as its more traditional crossbreds.

"We have registered cattle, not because we're selling to the outside, but because we're tracking the bloodlines so we can get to where we want to be with our commercial herd.

Anything that's good enough to stay in our herd, we want it in our herd," Wilkinson says.

The ranch generally maintains a herd of 120 cows, now down to 90 due to heavy culling on the commercial side, eight bulls and 30 heifers. The original herd was Angus based, and the ranch still produces a lot of buyer-pleasing black calves. The straight red and roan calves that are discriminated against by traditional buyers go into their own program where hide color doesn't matter a bit.

Don Wilkinson is the detail partner for Adams Creek Ranch. He juggles information, statistics, and all the data he can gather to improve their "conception to consumption" control. Maximizing the profit and minimizing the cost requires Wilkinson to control as much as he can in every aspect of the operation...literally from the ground up.

The headquarters of Adams Creek Ranch is near Yoncalla, Ore., in the south-central rolling hills of the state's fringe, between rich arable land and timber country.

"The main income-generating agricultural crop here in Douglas County is grass," Wilkinson points out. "But we've been taught as an ag population in the U.S. to consider grassland as land no good for anything else, so you just throw some animals on it. We try to manage our grass as a crop."

Just as the Eskimos have a wide vocabulary to describe snow, Wilkinson has an entire language devoted to the growing and harvesting of grass.

"We monitor fertility, evaluate new species...just like any other crop. We're always searching for the next variety that will give us extra production with the same input costs."

He continues to plant test plots of promising new grass varieties, something he did as extension agent for Douglas County for Pasture and Livestock.

“Fortunately,” he says, “in Oregon, we have some of the best plant breeders in the world, and they’re giving us information on their varieties.”

He monitors the nutrition his grazing provides his cattle, constantly managing for critical times in herd life.

Wilkinson uses both permanent and temporary fencing to make rotatable pastures for his cattle, and he plans ahead to try to control production to meet their needs.

“We have no choice in what’s happening today,” Wilkinson points out. “I’m trying to manage (grass) for the next critical time...calving, weaning, feeding out.”

The management works both ways as he also uses the herd as a tool to manage pasture, and as cattlemen know, cows are natural self-fertilizers.

“Unbiased.” It’s Don Wilkinson’s favorite word. Although he has taken care to assemble cattle genetics that fit his program and to nourish grass stocks that suit his climate and herd needs, he continues his unbiased assessments of each detail of the operation...there’s always a way to make it better.

“I go outside every day and collect information,” says Wilkinson, “but I don’t go out with the idea that, say, cow #57 will be best. It’s a combination of what we’re seeing out there every day, what they’re doing in the real world, and then what the numbers tell us.”

Cost control, price control, and quality control form the heart of the Adams Creek Ranch’s direct marketing program, all Wilkinson’s responsibility.

To this end, Wilkinson maintains a close watch on his final product. He gets carcass data...not official United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) data, but as much as he can from using the grids and the guidelines and the experience of observers who look at every carcass for him. He also watches the cattle as they near his goal of 600- to 750-pound hanging weight at about 14 months and follows them into the cooler himself, learning his cattle inside and out, developing his own eye for what is under the hide.

His aggressive timetable relies on cattle with the muscle to hit an approximate yield grade of one or two, and so Wilkinson’s bulls are selected for medium-frame scores.

The ultimate unbiased observers of this program are the Adams Creek customers.

“We’re marketing a quality product,” Wilkinson says. “When you market a quality product, you limit the number of people who are willing to buy it at a quality price. Those people are not-for lack of a better term-Safeway shoppers.”

With no disrespect to the Safeway shoppers of the world, Wilkinson explains, “They’re not who I want to sell to, because they buy on price more than anything else. If I’m going to produce a quality product, then I want it to go to a consumer who appreciates the quality and is going to take the time and effort to cook it properly. They’ll have a quality product to put on the table, and they can be proud to share it with their friends and neighbors when they come to dinner...and then hopefully, their friends and neighbors

become our customers.”

Wilkinson ticks off his idea for what is needed in a quality product: Consistency, uniformity, marbling and tenderness. He went to the Beef Council for more information, and was told that consumers also want a beef product that is quick to prepare. But he’s found Adams Creek customers request stew meat, and roasts.

“We’re marketing to a fringe,” he says, “and they’re willing to spend the time and effort to cook a good product properly.”

Wilkinson’s finest marketing guides have been his customers. Wilkinson is enthusiastic about using every advantage modern technology can hand him to increase production, quality, profit...and consistency. GeneStar, a genetic testing company, which originated in Australia, is pioneering genetic testing of cattle for genetic traits of tenderness and marbling. Shorthorns have been identified at the top of the seven breeds tested for tenderness, and the Adams Creek bulls have been identified as carriers of those genes. In the future, the ranch will aim to buy only bulls that are homozygous-meaning they always pass on those characteristics to their offspring-for both tenderness and marbling.

The American Shorthorn Assn. encourages participation in their whole-herd reporting and provides for their members performance-based expected progeny differences (EPDs).

That’s another reason Shorthorns are a good fit for Adams Creek Ranch. Don Wilkinson has almost never met a statistic he didn’t see a use for. The ASA has also forged a deal with GeneStar, offering genetic testing for its membership at a discounted price. The cost of testing an animal is roughly \$100 for both the tenderness and the marbling tests...a little less for ASA members.

Customers have expressed interest in buying smaller quantities than the traditional quarter and a half carcass so Adams Creek Ranch has a USDA label, and the next marketing maneuver is into boxed beef. They’re also beginning to advertise in the food sections of two of Oregon’s major daily papers.

“I think one of the things that a lot of people don’t understand is that you have all these little things that you have to pay attention to when you’re trying to make something work like we are,” says Wilkinson...and that box of beef is another example of the need for thoroughness and marketing savvy.

The meat is packaged in clear heat-sealed wrapping so the consumer, when opening the box, can see just what they’ve bought. The boxes have to be the right size and shape so that 40 pounds of cut beef fills it attractively.

Wilkinson laughs. “Who’d have thought a farmer would have to spend so much time thinking about a cardboard box?”

Wilkinson’s biggest fear at this point is losing the Roseburg slaughter plant that has allowed their direct marketing business to grow. The concentration of power into a virtual monopoly of packing plants concerns him.

“Our whole country is geared to big business,” says Wilkinson, “and that isn’t what made us great. It’s the small mom and pop businesses that made America great.”

Don and Virginia Wilkinson and Harold and Marjorie Boucock are the moms and pops managing the Adams Creek Ranch business. Their future includes plans to continue building the customer base for their production of a quality beef product. Since they’ve been on this path, there’s also been some interest in having Adams Creek market meat for other producers through their system.

“It’s an interesting time,” says Wilkinson, with satisfaction.

And then it’s time to answer the phone again.