



All in the Family

Larson clan manages school and ranch
with focus, drive and family members.



Ken Larson, Josh Lowe and Lee Larson (l to r) stand in front of a group of the top females that would sell in their annual sale three days later. The operation is able to let go of so many good ones because Lee says they “just try to maximize the really good ones and mass produce them.”

Story and photos by Katrina Huffstutler

It's three days before Larsons' Polled Herefords' annual production sale, hosted the third Saturday of May each year. Eight inches of rain and a small tornado have come through the Clifton, Texas, ranch in the last few days. It's a race to get the final preparations checked off the to-do list under any circumstances, but Mother Nature is adding to the crunch. Of course no one would dare complain about rain or mud following the worst drought Central Texas has seen in decades.

But despite the tight schedule, Ken and Lee Larson, second- and third-generation cattlemen, and Josh Lowe, Ken's son-in-law, took time to pause and visit about their operation, their cattle, their family and more.

Fitting it all in is nothing new for this family. After all, they run two successful family businesses — the cattle operation and a private school — more than 75 miles apart.

And family business isn't a term used loosely. Ken serves as principal of the school he founded, while his wife, Carolyn, is the school's accountant. Lee formerly taught at the school, but these days the cattle operation is his full-time gig. His wife, Heather, and sister, Kelle, teach at the school, and Kelle's husband, Josh, works on the cattle operation with Lee.

Since the crew all live near the school in DeSoto, Lee and Josh have a pretty substantial daily commute. But like everything else in the business, it's planned out.

"Lee drives here and I drive home," Josh says. The duo spends the time debriefing, and whoever isn't driving is on a laptop, taking care of office work.

The early days

Ken grew up not far from where we stood talking that day, where his father raised Herefords — horned back then — and farmed. He was active in his FFA chapter, earning multiple awards. But instead of heading off to Texas A&M University after high school, he made the surprising choice of nearby Baylor University, which does not have an agricultural program.

"Dad said if I went to Baylor I could drive back and forth and work on the ranch," Ken says with a laugh. "So that's what I did." It's also what his son and daughter did.

It was while Ken was studying at Baylor that the name Running L Ranch came to be. He laughs as he recalls his art teacher always giving him a hard time about running back to the ranch. One day, the teacher surprised him with a logo, an L running. It's still used today and even has a place on the ranch house's porch next to the Larsons' Polled Herefords sign.



Ken poses with his son-in-law Josh and son Lee on the porch of the ranch house. Ken cites the two men's complementing characteristics and skills to the ranch's success.



continued on page 98...

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— Lee Larson



As they grew, the kids became very interested in the cattle. Ken says their interest helped the family continue with the tradition, even while the time commitment involved in running a private school made it more challenging.

Though Ken’s dad was a cowman, “it was different back then — you just had commercial cattle,” he says. Ken was the one to make the switch to a seedstock operation and to a polled herd.

“What about that first set you bought?” Lee says to his dad, with a laugh.

“Yeah, that first set...,” Ken trails off.

He recalls driving by a nearby ranch and noticing it was having a sale the next day. He made a plan to go, along with his father and a family friend. He came home with several lots.

Not long after turning the cattle out, Ken received a letter in the mail, letting him know the cattle weren’t quite what he’d hoped. The writer urged him to take them to the sale barn.

“Papa thought you were crazy,” Lee says. Ken agrees.

“Yeah. I told my dad and he looked at me and said, ‘You went to college! I thought you were smarter than that.’ He said, ‘Look at my cows, they’re cows just like yours. But look what you paid for yours.’”

It’s a funny story now, but at the time it was no laughing matter. Since then, the Larsons have learned a lot about running a successful breeding program and developed incredibly high standards. For example, “The more we have to mess with a cow, the shorter her time here,” Lee says.

Disciplined decision-making

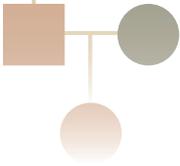
Though they do sell some bulls, no doubt, functional females are job one. To be a part of the operation, a cow must meet Lee’s strict criteria, especially those for udder quality and calving ease.

“When it’s calving season, we’ll of course hang around and watch everything. But there’s going to be times where we’re pulled away to take care of other things,” Lee says. “We don’t have a huge staff, so if trees are down at the river, we’re down there fixing it. If a cow starts going into labor, 99.9% of the time she needs to do it by herself.

“We don’t give second chances,” he continues. “If they calve and are not at the level we expect, they go to the sale barn. We’re trying to make them as stress-free as we can, both for us and our customers.”



Larsons’ Polled Herefords is tucked away in a picturesque corner of Central Texas, where trees are plentiful and hills contribute to the beautiful backdrop. Patriarch Ken grew up just a few miles from this pasture.



And it has paid off. The Larsons have developed a reputation for producing some of the best cows around.

“For example, these cows selling Saturday, a lot of them will go on to be donor cows for other people,” Lee says. “We just try to maximize the really good ones and mass produce them.”

And for the rare customer who isn’t satisfied? He won’t stay that way long.

“I’ve had guys tell us our weakness is that we always say the customer is always right,” Lee says. I think that’s our strength. We stand behind [what we sell]. If it didn’t meet your goal, then let’s figure it out and get it fixed the right way. Sometimes you lose a little on that one animal, but in the end it usually pays off.”

He adds that he’d “rather eat it than have someone have a bad experience” — especially the smaller operator who has taken a big leap to invest in their genetics.

Their program also consists of an aggressive flush program, in which Lee says breed-leading females are mated with progressive sires to create the next generation.

They sell a majority of their cows every year, so the herd is young.

“We go from donors to young cows, there’s not a lot of in between,” Lee says, adding that all of the fall calving cows were sold this year.

“I think we’re successful because we take chances and flush younger cows because we’ve seen their history and their genetics,” Lee says. “I had a guy tell me, and it’s true, we breed our cattle like a college recruiter recruits football players.”

He explains, “When a recruiter goes to meet the parents, if the mom comes in and she’s real sassy and petite and says,

‘Hi, I’m Sally,’ they don’t sign them. But if she walks in and says [in a deep voice], ‘Hi, I’m Joann,’ and gives a good, firm handshake, they do. It’s going to rub off on the kids. When we look at pedigrees, it has to have that bottom side matriarch cow in there for us to use them. “You’re only as good as your mama.”

That discipline applied in the breeding barn transfers elsewhere, too.

Though it’d no doubt be easier to hire out their website, social media, videos and catalogs, Lee says



Females come first at Larsons’ Polled Herefords. As Lee says, “You’re only as good as your mama.”

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they do it all themselves. Likewise, they don’t drive brand-new vehicles or have fancy equipment.

“We would rather go buy a donor cow than buy a new truck,” he says. “The tractor’s hood may be popping off, but it still lifts the bale the same as a new one.”

And while it’d be nice to buy feed in 50-lb. bags or have a feed truck, they buy in bulk — anything to keep overhead down and the focus on quality cattle.

But living with little inconveniences — whether it’s a long commute or not owning the latest must-have product — pays off.

“You saw that picture up in the office of what the place used to look like, and you see what’s here today,” Ken says. “That didn’t just happen overnight and it took everyone in the family to do this.” **HW**