

Continuing a Legacy

Clemson University uses Trask genetics as a teaching and Extension herd for students and producers.

by Danielle Beard Hayden

Unique: The word Clemson University Animal Scientist Brian Bolt uses to describe both the infamous Trask genetics and the man who spent his life developing them.

Creating a legacy

In 1931 Neil Trask, Beaufort, S.C., purchased an island off the coast of Beaufort, that was home to a few native cattle. Even though the Trask family business of vegetable farming was going strong, he decided to shift some focus to improving the genetics of his native-island cattle and purchased a few Hereford bulls.

“I really think that is where the love affair with Hereford cattle began for him,” Bolt says.

Trask began assembling his herd, envisioning a breed that could lift the fortune of a sinking cotton economy during the Great Depression. Not only

did he begin selecting cattle to thrive in the Piedmont/Foothills environment, but Trask began growing grass that would also thrive in the same climate to economically feed his cattle.

The Clemson Hereford herd is providing a research and teaching platform for improving cattle genetics in South Carolina.



PHOTOS COURTESY OF CLEMSON UNIVERSITY

“From what I can tell he made his grass selection based on soil types,” Bolt explains. “This is where Mr. Trask’s story really begins.”

According to Bolt, after being bitten hard by the cattle-loving bug, Trask put several thousand miles on his truck traveling to procure genetics to complement and to improve his own herd.

In 1937 Trask made a trip to Kansas and other western states to purchase Mossy Plato-bred cattle as well as other bloodlines. Mossy Plato was a Kansas line from which Clemson had also obtained a bull.

“We don’t know the exact story,” Bolt says. “We don’t know if Mr. Trask saw our bull or some of his progeny here before he went out and bought daughters, or if the timing was right, and we ended up with that bull about the same time he purchased his, but that is how Trask’s genetics were first introduced to the university in the mid-30s/early-40s.”

In 1940 Trask purchased a large amount of land in Calhoun Falls, S.C., and moved the herd there.



PHOTO COURTESY OF FOWKEN FARMS

Norris Fowler and Neil Trask

A long relationship

“Both stories, the history of Trask genetics and Clemson’s tie with the brand, are intertwined,” Bolt explains.

After the first encounters of genetics between the two in the ’30s-’40s, Clemson and Trask each “did their own thing.” Throughout several decades, Trask continued to improve his genetics until the ’90s, when his declining health prevented him from being as involved. For a number of years, Clemson continued its program, with nothing exceptionally notable, until the early 2000s, when due to budget cuts, the university was forced to disperse its cattle herd.



Brian Bolt, Clemson animal scientist, directs the development of the Hereford herd that traces its roots to the Trask cattle first bred in South Carolina during the Great Depression.

“It became almost the perfect storm for those (Trask) genetics to start coming up for sale and folks stepping in to rescue them,” Bolt states. “With us literally not having any Hereford cattle, one of our administrators stepped in and was able to access some of those last Trask females and so began our most recent history with those cattle.”

One such man to step in to save the last of the Trask line was Steven Meadows, Clemson University associate dean for the Cooperative Extension Service. A Hereford enthusiast himself, Meadows knew Trask personally and saw the value in his genetics as well as the need to rebuild a grass-based Hereford herd at Clemson.

Meadows love for the line began as a teenager after purchasing a pair of Hereford heifers from Fowken Farms in Jonesville, S.C., a line that intertwines with Trask, for a 4-H project.

“Mr. Fowler (of Fowken Farms) and Mr. Trask were such great friends they were known to trade bulls, that’s why a lot of times you hear people refer to them as Fowler/Trask cattle,” Bolt says.

Not alone in his mission to preserve the Trask line, Norris Fowler of Fowken Farms, Randy Owen of Tennessee River Music and Teddy Gentry of Bent Tree Cattle Co. provided four cows from the line to which Meadows harvested embryos in his beginning efforts of rebuilding the Clemson herd.

Unique Herefords

“Everyone has their own take on the story, but personally, I think Mr. Trask was a

pretty interesting, driven individual, and the decisions he made were his own,” Bolt says.

Trask didn’t seem to be influenced by many external factors when selecting genetic traits for his cattle.

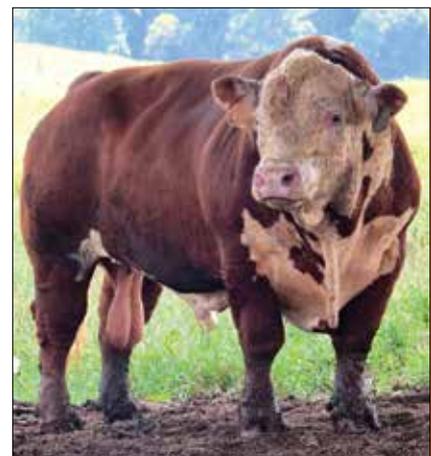
“He bred cattle that suited him,” he continued. “He was one of those people if you liked his cattle, that was great; if you didn’t, then he just didn’t care.”

According to Bolt, Trask was somewhat of an alchemist when it came to his cattle. Trask’s road to finding what worked for him best involved using different genetics, which resulted in some variation throughout his herd.

“If you study the pedigrees, it’s not as if that herd was locked down at some point in time with no external influences; he experimented and found what worked for him and what didn’t.”

Trask’s emphasis on creating consistent, moderate-sized cattle that suited the environment, instead of market

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Battle Rupert T-352, a Trask-genetics bull raised by Clemson University, fetched \$25,000 from a Texas rancher this fall.

demand, was heavily reflected during the '70s and '80s. Compared to the average Hereford female of that time, his cattle weren't as large framed, were generally thicker, and were a little less feminine and angular and, therefore, weren't as high performing. Despite going against the grain, Trask developed a customer base that trusted him and his genetics.

"There was pressure put on feet, there was pressure put on udders, pressure put on longevity, the things we collectively term 'convenience traits' today, are what drove his decisions then," Bolt says.

Some stories and folklore that surround Trask genetics stem from Trask's quirky way of approaching his herd management. Bolt explains, Trask was known to stay in a hotel for a few days when deciding which bulls to turn out with which cows.

"He had numbering systems that from the outside might seem confusing. One number was on the bull's tag, a different number was written on the registration paper and then they called the bull something else.

"For a first timer it might have been difficult to figure out exactly what was going on, but in my mind, that was kind of the Trask persona and Trask approach to it," Bolt says.

Genetic benefits

Trask cattle have traits selected for them to thrive in the hot southeastern U.S. environment. According to Bolt, this ability has its pros and cons.

"A friend of mine refers to these cattle as 'ingredient cattle,'" he says. "They're often not the final package you are looking for, but they offer the pieces to correct these things."

These convenience traits added with heat tolerance and docile nature make Trask cattle easy to work with. Perhaps most important is their tolerance of fescue.

"It's a little hot and a little tough here in the summer. We don't have the luxury of having a lot of high quality grass; we can grow a lot of grass, but that is not necessarily good," Bolt explains. "This heat tolerance and adaptation to the environment, I think, is what makes them so unique."

"We take pretty seriously our job of propagating what we refer to as 'pure Trask pedigrees' which are still true to form."

— Brian Bolt

Coming full circle

Bolt, who directs the development of the Trask herd, was familiar with the lineage even before his days at Clemson.

"My dad and granddad actually bought bulls from the Trask ranch for their Hereford farm over the years," he adds. "So life coming full circle has been interesting for me."

After going away to college with the intention of coming back to his family's farm, Bolt ended up back in the area for grad school.

"I don't know if it was serendipity or fate, but I started grad school at Clemson and 15 years later I'm on faculty," he says.

Bolt explains the university's herd is managed by staff at the beef farm, but Meadows was looking for someone specific to coordinate the direction of the Trask herd.

"I think it is just dumb luck that I happened to be standing there, but my area is beef cattle genetics, so I like to think there was some logical reason somewhere on paper that I get to work with them," he humbly credits.

Vision for the future

Clemson stresses the importance of preserving the future of Trask genetics. While Trask cattle may not have all the components of a perfect package, the university wants the line to maintain its original mission — moderate, southeastern-conditioned, sound with convenience traits.

"The industry has made a tremendous amount of progress, and there are a lot of good genetics," Bolt says. "We see these cattle as being a component of that, but then again, not the complete answer. We take pretty seriously our job of propagating what we refer to as 'pure Trask pedigrees' which are still true to form."

In order to make sure Trask genetics are preserved, Clemson has intentionally outcrossed some of the pedigrees.

"So that we have some benchmarks and we are not just operating the vacuum," he explains.

Clemson has also begun using its Trask cattle as a teaching and Extension tool, locking in the future need of the herd.

"It's a unique situation, and I think it has really been positive," Bolt notes. "A systems approach is the teaching objective."

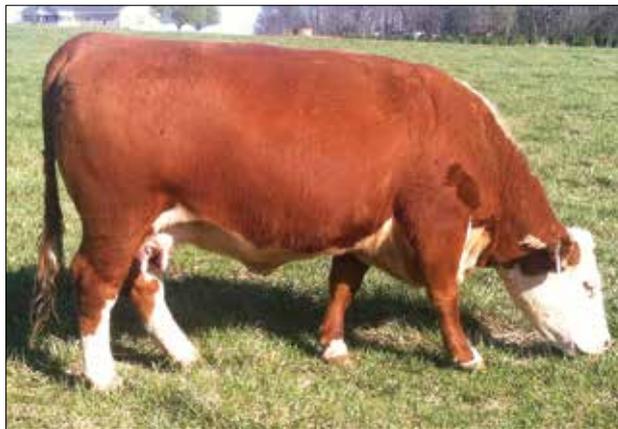
A systems approach, he explains, is teaching that there is no one part more important than the other.

"You can be good in everything but one, and that one will be what gets you. We talk a lot about raising cattle in the classroom, it's easy enough, but eventually they'll need to go out and actually breed cattle."

According to Bolt, all of what has happened with the Trask cattle — especially saving the genetics — wouldn't have been possible without the dedication of several individuals.

"We're just lucky to be in the position we're in, if not for a couple of years we might've completely lost those genetics. There are a whole lot of people who deserve credit for this."

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A typical Trask-bred female — one that will thrive in the southeastern U.S.