



# The New Breed

A legacy, a living and a life on the Great Plains.

*By Nik Bristow*



**A** cold blast of air accompanies the herdsman, Brandon Furr, as he pushes open the door and steps into the barn. He looks red-faced and stern under his black cowboy hat, his collar flipped to the wind, blonde whiskers bristling. Behind him, the Kansas winter howls and booms like the prehistoric ocean it once was, echoing the clang of buoys from every loose gate and chain within earshot.

It is 48 hours before the winter livestock sale at J&N Ranch. It's a time when exhaustion hides at the bottom of each polystyrene cup of coffee, when red-eyed stares are broken by dirty jokes and half-laughs from the ranch hands. It's a time when the massive Black Hereford bulls stand smoothed and shining under the barn lights at midnight—ton-weight blocks of rippling obsidian, trot-

ting and twirling like cartoon prizefighters in the ring. It's a time when the sale barn stalls are raked clean and shaken with the sweet spread of cedar chips. It smells like optimism; like hope. But most years in Kansas, hope hibernates until May or October or sometime next year.

In the barn alley, rancher Dirck Hoagland waits for news from his herdsman. He tugs on the bill of his baseball cap, like the pitcher he was in college, when the count was suddenly stacked against him.

"How many did we lose?"

Furr takes the last drag of his cigarette and drops it outside before pulling the door closed behind him, a final shiver and stomp in protest.

"Two leet'l heifers and a leet'l bull," says the stout Texan, weaving

Mexican vowels in his Panhandle lilt. The accent is hard to place, sounding almost Irish. It turns out to be a one-off, a hybrid, a habit from Furr's years as the lone native English-speaker on the feed yards where he'd cowboied. "Foundem down by the river bottoms," he says. "Under a big broken tree branch that fell on them."

At the news of the dead calves, Hoagland begins digging his heel in the pine chipped floor, like a worried pitcher on the mound, or like a man chopping through a problem in his mind. He doesn't look up at Furr.

"And a fourth one," adds Furr, lighting another cigarette with his ungloved hand. "Leet'l heifer I found in the creek and doctored didn't make it."

Hoagland tenses his jaw. Four dead calves in one night is certainly not un-



heard of in ranching; but with the added strain of the upcoming sale, just two days away, and with the below freezing weather, this is news the 35-year-old rancher could've done without. He is beginning to question his luck, maybe more. Four calves gone in one night... gone in a single snap... gone with the wind.

What else could you do but joke about it? When your lower back was in spasm. When your hands hurt to hold a glass of water. When the frozen manure broke your fingernails and got stuck underneath where no pocketknife could free it. What else could you do but joke about your family's fortunes? About possible concussions? About life

and death... when so much wasn't up to you? If you couldn't laugh, you might lose hope.

True, his ancestors had managed to hold on. In fact they'd thrived here in Kansas for more than a century and a half—a hundred and fifty winters this bad, worse even. They must have laughed a lot.

He knows it's a mental game. That it's always extra innings. That there is no off-season. But tonight, he's too tired for good humor or metaphor or self-pep talks. Tonight, he feels something cold creeping in.

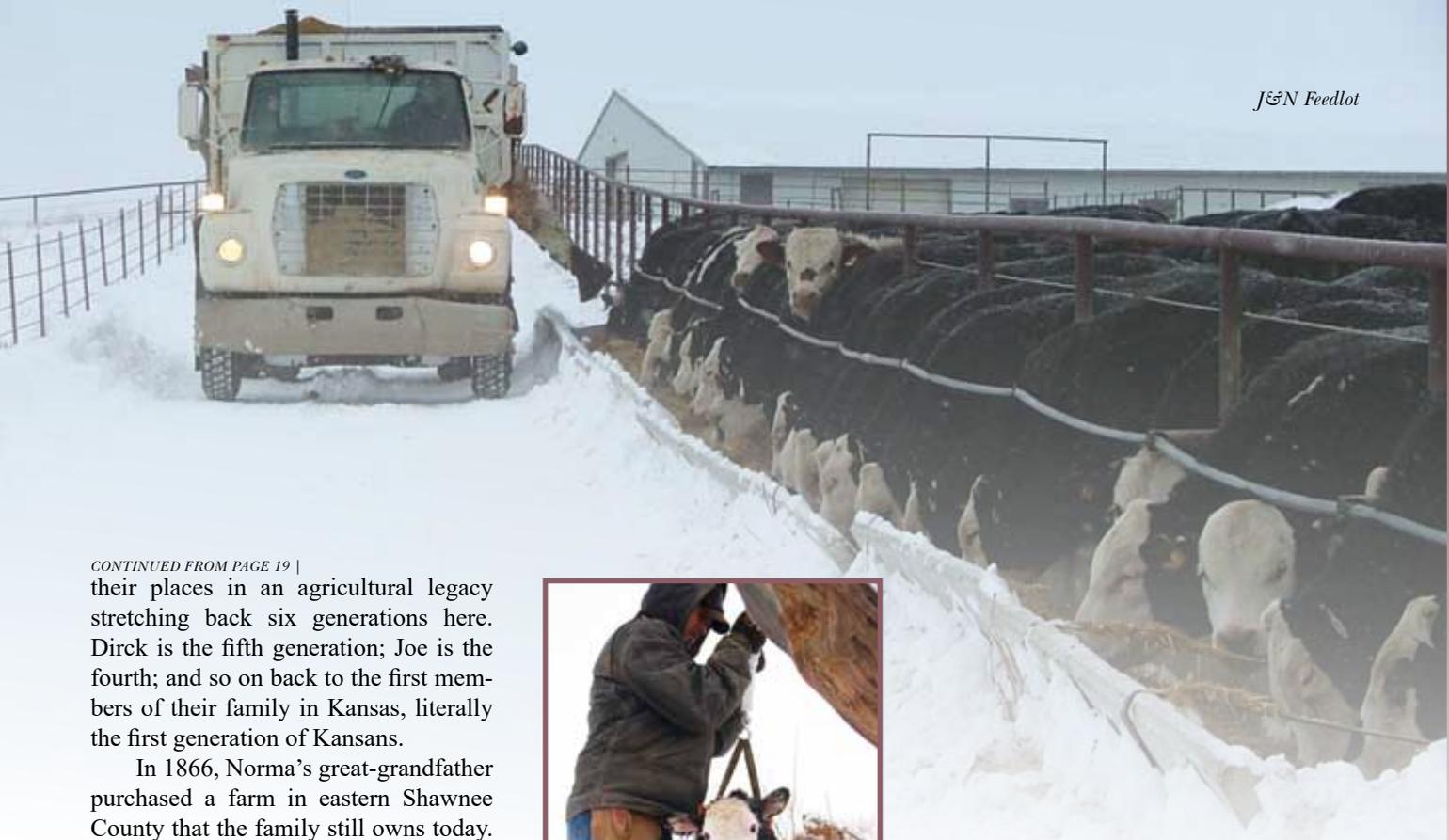
"Sometimes..." he says, biting off the words. "Sometimes I think this is a stupid way for us to make a living."

### THE LEGACY

Joe and Norma Hoagland live in the house on the hill, just off the main ranch road. They are the "J" and "N" in J&N Ranch. The couple sold another farm to buy this place a little over 30 years ago and together they and their children have kept it up ever since.

While still involved in the day-to-day, Joe and Norma have steadily been handing the reins to son Dirck over the past several years.

Dirck and his wife Natalie and their boys Dayton and Reed live on the ranch as well, in their own residence. In fifteen or twenty years, if the little boys make the decision to come home and be ranchers like Daddy did, they will take



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their places in an agricultural legacy stretching back six generations here. Dirck is the fifth generation; Joe is the fourth; and so on back to the first members of their family in Kansas, literally the first generation of Kansans.

In 1866, Norma's great-grandfather purchased a farm in eastern Shawnee County that the family still owns today. At the time the farm was purchased, a year after the Civil War ended, Kansas had been a U.S. State for only five years.

It's a proud legacy to be sure, but when you work livestock, regardless of how well you've done in the past, the future is never guaranteed.

#### THE LAND

J&N Ranch, Leavenworth KS —

Back in 1902, long before this place was called J&N Ranch, human remains were discovered nearby during the digging of a cellar. That archaeological find, bones of a man and young boy, became known as "Lansing Man" and were later attributed to native persons living around 3600 BC. The fact that a man and boy were walking over this very ground 5000 years before Christopher Columbus landed in the Caribbean seems significant somehow. Surely, these earlier people were kin to one another. Likely, they were a father and son. Were they nomads following the river or the game trails? Or did they perhaps, like the land's current inhabitants, consider this place their home?

Admittedly, it's a good spot. Probably was back then, too. From the hilltops high above the river, a person has good sight lines in all directions. A good view of the water. A clear advantage over ap-



proaching predators. Even a perch from which to spot the migrating herds that once stampeded this country in unstoppable, hundred-mile parades; and occasionally still do, a little farther west.

Gunbarrel Ranch, Eskridge, KS—

Famed explorer Zebulon Pike (on his way to naming Pike's Peak in Colorado) is said to have first coined the name by which these hills are known today, for the abundance of flint rock in the soil. The presence of that flint rock, which can chew through car tires like pencil erasers, is chief among the reasons the soil in the Flint Hills of Kansas, a state otherwise known for wheat and nicknamed "America's Breadbasket," has never been successfully broken up and farmed. It's as if the Flint Hills were meant for cattle grazing and wind harvesting alone, both of which are abundant in the region.

There are no wind turbines on Gunbarrel Ranch, however. Aside from shipping pens the Hoagland family constructed in 2006, and a small ranch cabin, the land is largely vacant. Just 5000 contiguous acres of grass and barbed wire. Its borders and pastures require 26 miles of fencing, the maintenance of which presents a literal marathon.

#### THE LINEAGE

J&N Ranch is the birthplace of the Black Hereford. The breed was developed here in the 1990s and the first registered Black Hereford bull was born on the ranch in 1997.

The main purpose of the Black Hereford breed is to produce bulls with Hereford heterosis for use on Angus-based herds, while keeping the calves black. The logic behind the breed is one of simple math; black hides enable the cattle to qualify for market premiums not available to red-hided cattle. So, black sells; but, by adding Hereford docility and feed efficiency to Angus carcass traits, the resulting animals are something more than the sum of their genetics.

Today, the Hoagland family is concentrated on remaining the nation's premier Black Hereford breeder. At J&N,

the focus is on calving ease and Angus carcass traits while monitoring feed intake and dry matter conversion from the Hereford genetics. In the past twenty years, they've seen some fantastic results, and they remain optimistic for the future of the breed.

### THE LIVING

Thankfully, despite the threat of bad weather, the February 2016 bull sale at J&N Ranch was a great success. Strong turnout and good word-of-mouth publicity both before and after the sale were credited with the positive results.

One rancher called from Colorado to say he would only be buying J&N Black Hereford bulls from now on; that their offspring were the best he'd seen. The auctioneer himself said people had been calling him personally, asking if the bulls looked as good as rumored. Those particular phone calls had the whole Hoagland clan smiling. The turn above freezing weather the day after the sale didn't hurt either.

### THE LIFE

Two days after his family's big sale, Dirck Hoagland is behind the wheel of the feed truck at sunrise. He is watching steam roll out from the feed troughs, a hungry-headed cattle fog, rising along both sides of the ranch road, hot breath and hot silage rolling from the chute and smoking like the long, cold Missouri River in the distance. He sips his coffee and checks the horizon. He sees his father's truck parked outside the office attached to the sale barn, silhouetted by the sun on the opposite hill.

The CB radio

squawks. It's the herdsman, Furr, reporting that he's off to tag calves, that he'd seen several new ones during his night checks.

He puts down his sun visor, struggling to keep watch on his end of things through the glare. His other senses compensate. He smells the coffee and the

sour-yeast odor of the feed all around, mixing with the bittersweet whiff of diesel fumes. It's warm in the idling truck and he's comfortable in his thick winter work clothes.

He is thinking of his father in the office, still an early riser, an early worker, when other men his age are on the golf course in Kansas City or still asleep. He is thinking of his own young sons, eating breakfast prepared by his wife in the small brick house down below. It's another breakfast he has to miss, another meal he takes in the truck, a tradition and consequence of the family business. He is even thinking of his great-great grandfather, buying land on a frontier still in its infancy, in this new place called Kansas.

After so many generations of this life, why had they stayed? There had to be a reason greater than pure stubbornness, greater even than legendary Kansan fortitude. And surely, he thinks, they knew easier ways to make money.

He decides it must be about place. Not geography, but a place in time, a place in a family's proud history. This ranching life, this inheritance, is about generations, past and present. It's about parents and their offspring, about fathers and sons, about a man and a boy, the ones who died on the other side of the hill long ago — families watching the river pass by — watching the herds move across the land — as if ordained to be this way forever.

"You know," he says, squinting and smiling into his coffee mug. "I think we might just make it in the cattle business."

