



Performance on Grass

At Fowken Farm, the Fowler family has been turning grass into beef for 68 years.

by **Angie Stump Denton**

In the rolling hills of northwest South Carolina, the ability to utilize forage 10 or more months of the year is key to the profitability of a beef operation. At Fowken Farm near Jonesville, the Fowler family has been raising Hereford cattle that perform on grass since 1946.

Norris Fowler, Fowken Farm owner and manager, says the Fowken Hereford is well adapted to its environment and has the ability to efficiently convert grass. He has continued his father's legacy of selecting and producing females with fleshing ability on forage, fertility, moderate milk production, good temperament, natural thickness and uniformity.

Looking back

Fowken Farm was started by Norris' father, Norris "Buddy" Fowler. A retired Brigadier General, Buddy saw combat duty in World War II and served in the Carolina National Guard.

After returning from the war in 1946, Buddy began his cattle operation with a herd of commercial cows. He soon sold them to acquire a polled

Hereford sire, Battle Domino 18, a Plato cow and a Charming Princess cow.

Buddy and his wife, Hettie, chose to name the farm Fowken Farm. It was the combination of their family names — Fowler and Kennedy. Both families were cotton farmers. The Fowken headquarters is the original Benjamin Kennedy family homeplace, which was built in the early 1800s.

In the early days of Fowken Farm, Buddy utilized performance testing, the Clemson University Bull Test and the American Polled Hereford Association Guide Lines program

to develop fast-growing, efficient bloodlines that perform without supplemental feed.

Buddy was good friends with Neil Trask, and through the years, the two traded and swapped cows. The Trask cattle are still known today as being economical, beef-making, profit-making, grazing animals. These same elements are the basis of the Fowken program.

Buddy also set out to determine how his cattle met the demands of the feedlot and sent cattle to participate in the Kansas National Feedlot Test and Carcass Evaluation.

He passed away in 1997.

Fowken today

After graduating from North Carolina State University in 1972 with a degree in animal science, Norris returned home to help with the family businesses.

Today Norris and his wife, Ann, own and manage Fowken Farm along with the family's feed and seed store — Union Oil Mill Farm and Garden Inc. (UOM). The Fowlers have owned the UOM business since 1926.

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In 1946 Buddy Fowler started Fowken Farm with the purchase of Battle Domino 18. Buddy was recognized for his contributions to the polled Hereford breed in 1993, when he was inducted into the American Polled Hereford Association Hall of Fame.

UOM once specialized in marketing cottonseed and owned four cotton gins; today it offers lawn and garden supplies, pesticides, insecticides and trees.

Norris has followed in his father's footsteps, serving 22 years in the Army National Guard infantry before retiring. Both Fowler men also served as president of UOM and have been passionate about producing Hereford cattle that excel in their grass-based environment.

Norris and Ann's son Rogers helps with the day-to-day operations on the farm and son Ramsey assists with UOM. Their daughter, Lucy, works off the farm and is involved in the international body shipping business.

Breeding program

Today the Fowken herd includes 250 Hereford mama cows and 100 commercial cows.

Having a predominately closed herd, Norris raises his own bulls and purchases very few females. Replacement heifers are bred to calve in September and October with the main cow herd calving in January and February. Norris says this schedule allows them to give the first-calf heifers extra time before breeding them to calve with the main herd.

"We monitor the fleshing of our cattle at weaning," Norris says. "This helps determine a cow's ability to survive in our program. If they do



Norris Fowler has continued his father's legacy of producing profit-making grazing animals.



Home-raised bulls are used exclusively at Fowken Farm.



Rogers Fowler, Norris' son, helps with the day-to-day operations on the farm.

not qualify, we put them in our commercial herd."

The Fowlers collect cow weights at weaning and evaluate the ratio of calf weaned to cow weight. This is one tool they use in the culling process. They also look at birth weight and milking ability.

"Our cow herd must be able to thrive in our grass-based environment," Norris says. "We require a well-balanced animal, which includes balanced EPDs (expected progeny differences), good structure and carcass data. We want our cattle to be naturally thick, easy keepers with a round-type muscle."

Steven Meadows, Clemson University associate dean for the Cooperative Extension Service, has known the Fowler family and followed the Fowken program for more than 35 years. He bought his first 4-H projects — two Hereford heifers — at the age of 15 from the Fowlers.

He describes Fowken genetics as cattle that fit their environment. "The Fowken cattle have very balanced EPDs, they have been selected for optimum growth and optimum efficiency," he explains. "In this part of the U.S. performance on grass is paramount. Cattle need to be able to go out and survive on grass 10 months out of the year. The Fowken genetics thrive in that strategy."

Meadows explains that when he visited the farm last fall he saw bull calves that were averaging 700 to 750 lb. "That tells me the program is working." He also complimented the herd for its udder and structure quality.

Fowken bulls

The Fowlers have an intensive, multi-step selection process for bull selection.

Norris explains the first culling is done at birth. Bulls with heavy birth weights or extensive calving problems are castrated at that time. The bull calves are evaluated again at 3 to 4 months of age and later at 6 months of age. If at any stage a bull does not meet the Fowken criteria, he is castrated.

Meadows described Fowken-bred bulls as strong, thick, deep-muscled with lots of capacity and the ability to work in a forage-based program.

Each year Norris retains five bulls for his own breeding program and, on average, offers 35 bulls for sale.

Marketing strategy

Through the years Fowken Farm has hosted more than 30 successful production sales and distributed cattle into 23 states and Spain. The Fowlers hosted its last sale on Nov. 6, 1993.



Fowken females are expected to be fertile, moderate framed, produce moderate milk, have a good temperament, have natural thickness and, above all, perform on grass.

Since then they have sold most Fowken genetics by private treaty and in a few consignment sales.

Each year they sell groups of commercial open and bred heifers. Norris says their marketing philosophy is to try to offer the different types of products a customer wants. With this plan in mind, he started offering baldie heifers for sale. The quality of these baldie heifers helps stimulate interest in Hereford bulls.

Norris says he has seen an increased demand for Hereford bulls in recent years. This past year he started expanding his bull marketing to Florida, consigning some bulls to the Florida Cattlemen's Association sale in Ocala. For years the family has consigned females to state association sponsored Hereford sales in South and North Carolina.

Steer calves are sold on video. "We've had good luck with repeat buyers," Norris explains. "We also use *HerefordMarketplace.com* to advertise the steers qualify for the CHB (Certified Hereford Beef) program."

Pasture management

The Fowlers utilize a semi-rotational grazing plan.

The Fowlers feed very little hay or supplement. "The drought has changed our ideology of grazing," Norris explains. "We are trying to do more rotational grazing as water and grass permits. With the current drought and the price of fertilizer we have had to match our acreage with our animal numbers."

Because of drought and rising input costs the Fowlers have reduced herd size to match their resources, but the Fowken program of producing Hereford females that perform on grass

continues to be one that Southeast producers strive to emulate.

Clemson donation

Clemson University is building a grass-based Hereford research herd focusing on Fowken and Trask genetics. Last fall the Fowler family allowed Meadows and his colleague Brian Bolt to sort through the Fowken herd to select females to utilize in the Clemson program.

"We were allowed to pick from the entire herd, nothing was held back," Meadows explains. "We were impressed with the overall completeness, teat quality, moderate frame and quality of feet and legs we found in the Fowken cow herd. They have enough depth in their program so they were not scared to allow us to select nine of their top cows."

The University purchased eight, and the Fowlers donated one. Meadows says five of the females are going into the University's donor program to be used as the University tries to propagate the Trask-based genetics. The cattle will be used in teaching and Extension to demonstrate how much of an impact a very defined breeding program focused on producing economical, beef-making, profit-making, grazing animals can make over time.

Norris is excited about the future of the Hereford breed and how Hereford genetics will fit the beef industry for years to come. "There is a greater demand for grass-fed beef than ever before," he says. "I think the people who have maintained genetics for the grass-type animal are now in a position to help our Hereford breed meet industry demand." **HW**



Serving his rural community

Norris Fowler says it is important for a person to give back to his community. For the last 22 years, he has served on the local rural electric cooperative board of directors.

This experience has allowed him to meet farmers from all over the U.S. In this role he has assisted with rural development and worked to make sure rural areas have electricity and have access to Internet and other services. "We recognize problems in rural America and try to help with those issues," he explains.

While serving the cooperative, he has had the chance to travel to events or schools in different parts of the U.S. "I always take my herd book with me as I travel to other parts of the world and try to go visit Hereford breeders or other producers in those areas," Norris says. "I really enjoy visiting with other breeders and learn how they manage their herds." **HW**

Adding value

The Fowler family has also ventured into other projects to utilize the farm's resources and generate more revenue. The farm includes 4,300 acres of land, which include timberland that is not suitable for grazing.

Through the years, the Fowler family has established wildlife and timber management programs. They rent out tracts of land for hunting and have worked with the South Carolina Forestry Commission to develop a 20-year plan incorporating best management practices for the farm's timberland.

Norris says when harvesting timber, they take wildlife into consideration and are selective in the process of cutting

hardwood trees — nut, hickory and oak trees.

Last year the family ventured into hosting a hare scramble event on the farm. A hare scramble is a form of off-road motorcycle racing that varies in distance and time with the riders completing multiple laps around a marked course through wooded or other rugged natural terrain. The overall winner is the rider who maintains the highest speed throughout the race.

They hosted two events in 2012 and plan to host two more in 2013. "We then plan to evaluate if they have had a detrimental effect to our farm," Norris explains. **HW**