

Livestock Weekly[®]

VOL. 59 - NO. 32

SAN ANGELO, TEXAS

THURSDAY, AUGUST 16, 2007

\$30 PER YEAR



A WINDING TRAIL led Watt Casey, left, with wife Dosa, to South Texas, far West Texas and Colorado before he finally settled on long-time family land in Shackelford County, where he has ranched since 1964. He attributes a no-nonsense attitude toward cattle raising to two mentors, his uncle, Watt Matthews, and his brother-in-law, Tom Lasater.

Beefmaster Breeder Watt Casey Is A Commercial Cowman At Heart

By Colleen Schreiber

ALBANY — Watt Casey has been raising Beefmaster cattle for the better part of 60 years, since long before they were even recognized as a breed, but he says he's really always been a commercial cowman at heart.

Casey attributes that inclination to the two men who most influenced his life — his Uncle Watt Matthews, a lifelong rancher in Shackelford County who was always a commercial cowman, and to his brother-in-law Tom Lasater, founder of the Beefmaster breed. Both men, though distinctly different, were legends in their own right.

From his Uncle Watt, he learned that the commercial cowman was the backbone of the cattle industry, and even more so the backbone of the purebred business.

"Over the years we have always kept our focus on the commercial cowman," Casey says. "We have always tried to produce cattle that will do well for them, that will hopefully make them some money. We produce cattle to fit any environment."

From his Uncle Watt, he got the nickname Palomino, so named for the thick thatch of blonde hair that reminded his Uncle of a Palomino horse. The name stuck with him throughout his life, and though his friends shortened it to Palo, his Uncle Watt even later in life often still referred to him as Palomino.

It was his Uncle Watt who early in life taught him the ropes in the cattle business, and who later in 1947 gave him his start.

"Uncle Watt was a big influence on me, and I think a pretty good influence," Casey says.

Tom Lasater was just as big an influence. After all, it was Lasater who got him started in the Beefmaster business.

"Tom was very dynamic and very influential," Casey says. "He was a very good merchandiser, and he sold me on the breed, which was kind of a bad thing because of my Hereford background and Uncle Watt, but I have to say Uncle Watt was good-natured about it."

Casey says one of the reasons Lasater was so good at what he did was because he really was a commercial operator at heart as well.

"He didn't do anything that wouldn't be suitable for the commercial operator," Casey says. "He didn't pamper his animals and he understood, too, what it took to make money."

"Originally, Tom's goal was to top the San Antonio fat calf market. Ranchers got to watching how his calves sold, and sort of by accident he got to selling bulls to some of those ranchers," Casey says.

"Those early-day cattle wouldn't look anything like the Beefmasters of today," he adds.

Casey describes Lasater as a sound thinker though controversial, as some of his ideas were different for the time.

"He kind of scoffed at all of this pedigree stuff," Casey says.

In fact, Lasater was initially opposed to the startup of a Beefmaster breed association. Casey, however, is one of the founding members, and the only one still living.

Lasater began working on perfecting his cattle back in the 1930s, but he didn't come up with a name for the breed until the late 1940s and it wasn't until 1954 that the breed was officially recognized.

Lasater realized early that a three-way cross was much better than a two-way cross, Casey says.

"He used to say the three-way cross was infinitely better."

The three-way cross used to make the Beefmaster breed included a quarter Hereford, a quarter Shorthorn and half Brahman. Lasater also came up with what he termed the "six essentials" for raising quality cattle. Those included fertility, weight, conformation, hardiness, milk production, and disposition. The latter, Casey says, was added a bit later.

The Caseys and the Matthews family were among the early pioneer families that came to the Albany area, but Watt's parents moved to San Antonio in 1914.

"At that time San Antonio was kind of the going town," Casey says. "They used to have a saying, 'San Antonio — the biggest town in Texas — always has been and always will be.'"

His father was in the real estate and insurance business and later got involved in the oil business. He hit hard times during the Depression and never really got back on his feet.

The youngest of three, Watt was born in 1920. His family continued to live in San Antonio until 1936, and from there they went to Houston. As a young boy, instead of going to summer camp, Casey and his cousins spent the summers on the 40,000-acre Lamshead ranch. When he was old enough to drive, Casey had to be his grandfather's driver for the summer, a task which he never particularly cared for.

Casey dropped out of high school when he was 16 and came to Albany to work for his Uncle Watt and his aunt Lucile Brittingham. Watt and his sister were leasing the Phin Reynolds ranch from their father.

"I was very hyped up on being a cowboy," Casey says.

Lanham Martin, an old foreman on Lamshead, was his cowboy mentor.

He finished high school in Albany, graduating with the class of 1938. Casey attended the University of Texas for three semesters before he transferred to Texas A&M, where he earned a degree in veterinary medicine in 1943.

"I didn't particularly think about practicing full-time, but I thought it might be a good way to get into the cattle business," Casey says.

Casey volunteered for the United States Army, entering under the Army student training program, and ended up with a commission in the Army Veterinary Corps. He was stationed in New York City, where he was part of the meat inspection team. Following the Battle of the Bulge, the Army sent out a request for company grade officers to volunteer for the infantry. Casey volunteered. After infantry training, he volunteered for parachute training and eventually joined the 11th Airborne Division in the Philippines.

Following his army career, Casey returned to West Texas. Initially he spent some time working for still more family, the Reynolds Cattle Company at Kent.

"I made \$60 a month," Casey recalls. "The money wasn't important to me. I was just enjoying the cowboy life."

The wagonboss at the time was Jimmy Yeiser. Casey describes him as "an interesting old-time cowboy" and a native to that part of West Texas.

"One of Jim's sayings was 'Eat, sleep and ride a pony.'"

The family was in the process of getting out of the sheep business, and Casey participated in the final delivery of some 5000 sheep which had sold to Bugs Means.

After that short stint in far West Texas, Casey spent about a year working full-time as a practicing veterinarian, first at a clinic in Cleburne and then one at Abilene. There he worked with Dr. B.C. Roberson, one of his former classmates, and Dr. Phil Smith, one of the legendary veterinarians of that time.

It didn't take long for Casey to realize that being in practice full-time didn't really suit him, and in the fall of 1947 his Uncle Watt offered to sublease him an 1800-acre pasture on the Phin Reynolds ranch.

"I didn't have any money to speak of," Casey says, "so he let me partner with him on the cattle."

His Uncle Watt asked Gene Pickard and Jack Farmer, "two prominent ranchmen" in the Albany area, to put a value on the cattle. Farmer, "a famous steer man," valued the steers and Gene Pickard priced the cows and calves.

The following year Casey borrowed some money and went into business on his own. That year he began experimenting with some of Lasater's Beefmaster bulls, though they weren't yet known by that name.

"They were nervous cattle," Casey

admits. "Tom branded the L Bar. The L went on the left hip and the bar across the rear. That was because when they were running away in the brush they could see that they were branded," he jokes. "It was a pretty good idea, because they were wild."

Early on, Casey crossed some of those Lasater bulls onto some "Okie" cows.

"They were kind of plain cows," Casey says. "Cows that had a lot of Jersey in them. They were good milkers. They weren't very big, but they would raise a calf well over half their weight. One of my cousins used to call them 'mortgage lifters.'"

It was during this time that bought some Beefmaster cows from his friend Charlie Dick of Laredo. Casey was having difficulty finding lease country in the Albany area, so he decided to try to make a go of it in South Texas. In 1951 he and his wife Dosa, a Springfield, Massachusetts native, along with their first child, Watt Jr., moved to Webb County, where they leased 5000 acres from the Killam family.

"These cows were on their way to slaughter, and Charlie offered to let me palpate them and buy the ones in calf for slaughterhouse price. At the time I thought it was a good deal, but these cattle were particularly wild," he recalls. "We couldn't ride up to them at all. We had to sort of angle up to them. Those early cattle were a far cry from what we have now."

Still, by 1952 Casey was selling some of his bulls to area ranchers. The Killams, a prominent South Texas ranching family, were among his earliest customers. He also began selling breeding stock into Mexico. There was no such thing as papers and registration then, he notes, because these cattle had not yet been recognized as a breed and there was no breed organization.

As he quickly learned, it wasn't easy to make a living ranching in Webb County, particularly when drouth set in. As it turned out, a drouth was just getting started good in 1953.

"Albany looked like an oasis compared to Webb County," Casey recalls. "My Uncle Joe came down shortly after we leased the ranch. I remember him saying, 'There isn't enough grass on this place to wad a shotgun.'"

He burned a lot of pear during that time. At one point he burned pear for 17 months straight.

While in Webb County, Casey became friends with Gene Walker and his family.

"Gene's father was an interesting fellow with a lot of wisdom," Casey remarks. "He told me to get through a drouth, give the cattle all the pear they would eat along with a little cottonseed meal, and he would demonstrate with his hands what a 'little bit' was."

Casey, like so many of his fellow ranchers, got in a financial jam during the drouth. To survive, he took a second

job as a special livestock loan officer for the Farmers Home Administration. He kept this job for several years, but he never quit ranching.

In 1957, Casey's Uncle Joe Matthews bought a ranch near Kiowa, Colorado, just southeast of Denver in Elbert County. Casey was given an opportunity to lease this ranch, so in 1958 he moved his family from South Texas to Colorado. He continued to lease from the Killams for a number of years after he left. He ran mostly Mexican stockers during this time.

Casey moved his family back to Albany in 1964, this time for good, to lease part of the Phin Reynolds Ranch. By this time his mother, Ethel Matthews Casey, drew out of Matthews estate with 9000 acres of the Phin Reynolds ranch where Watt had gotten his start in 1947. Watt had the opportunity to buy part of the ranch from his mother and later the remaining portion from his sister's children.

Though ranching in other parts of the country afforded him some valuable lessons, he was glad to get back to Shackelford County, which had really been home to him since 1937.

"This country here is some of the best cow country around," he remarks.

Admittedly, most of Texas looks good this year. In the first six months of this year, Casey says, he has received well over the average annual rainfall — average being 26 inches. The last time it was this wet, he figures, was at the end of the 1950s drouth.

He has had a closed herd since about 1967. Like his mentor, Tom Lasater, Casey has always stayed attuned to the "six essentials."

"It was really ingenious of Tom to come up with those six essentials," Casey comments. "If you emphasize all of these things, then you are less likely to go too far in any one direction."

"To get the job done, a bull needs a certain amount of athletic ability and drive, and as Tom used to say, 'social dominance,'" he adds.

From the beginning, Casey has worked particularly hard on disposition and on narrowing the flight zone.

"Wild cattle are good sport, but they're not very good for business. In fact, they're very costly," he says.

Color is another attribute that, much to Casey's dismay, has become a marketing criterion.

"Color has nothing to do with the quality of the meat," he insists.

Still, because of market pressures, Casey hasn't kept a paint bull in years, nor a bull with a white face or white around the eyes. The latter goes back to his days in the commercial Hereford business, when cancer eye was a problem.

He implemented a one-chance breeding policy as early as 1954.

"If you let a cow slide one time, then she'll have an advantage that next year over those that have been working all

along," he explains. "She'll probably raise a better calf that year, better compared to one raised by a cow that didn't miss, and you may have a tendency to select her calf over another, but it won't be based on true merit."

He fine-tuned his breeding policies even further over the years by narrowing the breeding window from 90 to 60, then 45 days. In 1977 he implemented a 30-day breeding season and he's stuck with that ever since.

"So many of my thoughts are based on Tom's ideas," Casey says, "but one of the main reasons that I went to a 30-day season is that it gives us very uniform calves. They're all born about the same time, so it's easier to judge them when we're selecting replacements."

Casey admits that having a 30-day calving season is a tough policy that causes heavy attrition, but he believes his herd is better for it. Those that don't calve within the 30-day period are separated off, and the ones that breed later in the season are then offered for sale when they're safe in calf.

All of the breeding is done through natural service rather than AI.

"I guess that's part of that commercial cowman attitude coming out again," he comments. "Some of it, too, was that we were getting along fine without it, so I just didn't want to bother with it."

Casey has never used EPDs, either. Instead, he's used primarily weaning weights, yearling weights and visual appraisal to select herd sires. Today his children, who took over the operation several years ago, incorporate 205-day weights, DNA information, and they've recently started ultrasound to collect such data as rib-eye area and intramuscular fat.

"The kids look at all those numbers and they do their selection based on the numbers as well as appearance," Casey says. "I typically pick them without the figures, and most times we all come up with the same ones," he says.

Calves begin coming late August through September. The following fall well over half of their yearling bulls are offered for sale through private treaty, as they have been for the last 50-plus years.

Casey attributes what success he's had to some good teachers and to family members who extended their hand when he needed help. Most notably besides his Uncle Watt, other family members who helped him many times over included his Uncle Joe Matthews and his cousin Tom Blanton.

He also credits Dosa, his wife of 58 years, and their four children.

And, Dosa adds, "It was the Lord that helped us pay off the ranch debt that we owed. He sent us some wonderful buyers who bought faithfully through the years."

Casey sold the cattle to his four children, Watt Jr., Susan Williams, Rodney and David, a number of years ago, and they now lease the ranch, as well.