

Walt Lasley

TCFA's 2008 Chairman has weathered many storms in the cattle business.

BY JAMES HUNT

What does it take to qualify for the role of an industry leader? Years of experience in his field of endeavor? A track record of accomplishing significant goals? A proven ability to stand up to adversity?

If those things represent the qualities essential to leadership, then TCFA members can rest assured that their 2008 Chairman, Walter E. Lasley, is the right man for the job.

For more than a half-century—practically since the day he was born—Walt Lasley has been involved in the cattle feeding business. His entire life has been devoted to building and maintaining the successful family-owned feedyard he runs near Stratford, Texas. And he's certainly been tested along the way, but he never backed away from the fight.

When he started out, the cattle feeding business was very young, and so was Walt, who was all of five years old. At that age, most kids are sufficiently challenged by learning the alphabet and how to do simple arithmetic. But before he left for school each day, Walt had already risen extra early to help his dad take care of business.

His father, Walter Lasley, Jr., was among the early pioneers in Southern Plains cattle feeding. For years, he had operated a 300-head commercial cowherd before branching into the feeding business in 1953—beginning with just one pen and about 150 head of his own cattle.

“Our routine was that we would go out and walk the cattle while mother fixed breakfast. We always had to be back in time

for the Cotton John Show (a local farm news program), so that my dad could listen to the markets while he ate breakfast and got ready for the day's work,” Walt said.

“There wasn't a lot of conversation at our table when you were sitting there trying to listen. Of course that (radio show) was his only way of getting market information at the time. We didn't have telephones.”

So, at a very tender age, Walt Lasley entered the business that would be his life. And Walt and his siblings worked alongside their father building the operation that became Walter Lasley and Sons, Inc.

Growing A Business

From that start with one pen, over a 30-year span, the feedyard gradually grew its business—up to 1,000 head, then 2,000, then 3,000—until a pivotal event in 1967 when Walt's father had a Poarch Brothers feedmill built to replace an old hammermill. That modification enabled the yard to make a quick jump to 10,000 head. In the mid-1980s, the operation increased to a 20,000-head capacity and has held steady at that level since then. “20,000 works pretty well for us,” Walt said.

It might be hard to imagine an elementary school student making a firm decision on what his chosen profession would be, but Walt says he never gave consideration to anything other than feeding cattle. “I guess it was just assumed that I would be in this business. I didn't realize there was anything else.”

In fact, Walt says he has lived his entire life “on the feedyard” with two notable interruptions. The first came when he was in the sixth grade and his family’s house burned down, a tragedy that made it necessary for the Lasleys to move into Stratford.

“That was the most miserable year of my life,” said Walt, explaining that he really didn’t like the experience of being an in-town kid.

“My dad made me get a paper route. The only paper I could get was the Daily Oklahoman. There weren’t a lot of people in Stratford, Texas that wanted the Daily Oklahoman,” Walt said, describing the ordeal of a lot of bicycle pedaling between customers for a not so lucrative return.

Fortunately, the house was soon restored and Walt could resume the feedyard life he preferred. That is, until his next hiatus in 1966, when he graduated from Stratford High School and headed off to college.

In 1970, Walt graduated from Texas A&M University with a bachelor’s degree in animal science. Then it was back to the feedyard for good, and Walt simply never felt the temptation of wanderlust.

“I wouldn’t change a thing at all. The cattle feeding business has been very rewarding and fulfilling. The things I’ve enjoyed the most were working side by side with my dad for 32 years, helping my mother and dad reach their dreams and goals with the business, the people in the industry, and the opportunity to live in a community that has been so good to my family and me.”

Of course, anyone who’s tried to make a living in the cattle business knows that it isn’t all happy times.

There were certainly occasional pitfalls along the way for Walt. And he learned that succeeding in this industry requires more than hard work and some luck. “A lot of times the difference between making it and not making it is just not giving up,” said Walt.

“I saw my dad go through some pretty tough times. He provided me with about as good an example of perseverance as I could have had because I never saw him give up on anything. When it got tough, he just knuckled down and got tough, too.”

Not long after Walt had finished college, he found out just how tough the business can be. He received a real baptism by fire during the period in the mid-1970s that cattlemen still refer to as “The Wreck.” It was spawned in 1973 by a conspiracy of circumstances that hit the cattle business hard—the Arab oil embargo that triggered inflation and a recession, the escalation of grain prices that began when Russia bought up large amounts

of wheat to make up for the failure of its domestic crops, and a glut of cattle that resulted from a 10% jump in the nation’s cattle herd. The strain heightened as various consumer groups demanding lower prices organized meat boycotts, and the federal government eventually responded with a price freeze on beef at the retail level.

Between November 1973 and March 1975, the number of cattle on feed in Texas dropped 54%, and dozens of feedyards went out of business. But the Lasleys managed to survive. “We made a decision to start buying cattle and we’d start hedging them, and fortunately we bought the cattle and never did hedge them. It turned out that we made back everything we’d lost. A lot of times in the past you could do that. I’m hoping those times haven’t passed us by because we’re in tough times right now, and we need to be able to fight through them.”

TCFA

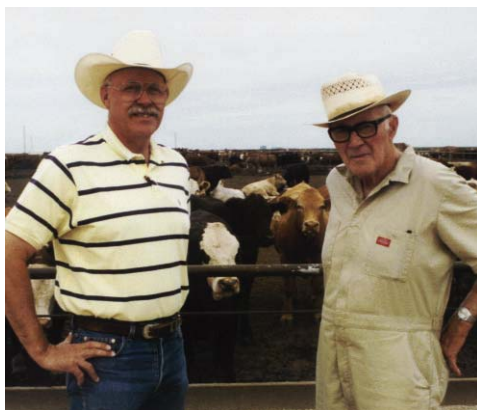
Indeed, these are times when the cattle business is once again confronted with difficult issues, but as cattlemen wage the many battles ahead, Walt says they have a powerful ally right beside them: TCFA. He’s a strong believer in TCFA, and you could almost say his confidence in the Association’s purpose is genetic. For just as Walt has extended his father’s legacy in the cattle feeding business, he’s doing the same thing in leading TCFA, an organization of which his father was a founding member.

At the time momentum was building among cattle feeders in Texas to create a new organization to represent their industry, Walt’s father was the president of what was known as the T-Bone Club, which some consider the forerunner of TCFA. “The T-Bone Club was an organization where the cattle

feeders got together and socialized and discussed problems and issues,” Walt explained.

The T-Bone Club was a good outfit, but many cattle feeders believed there was a need for something more substantial. So in May of 1967, a group of 10 cattle feeders—Walt’s father among them—met at the Holiday Inn West in Amarillo, and, after much discussion, voted to form TCFA. After that vote was held, Walt’s father was immediately appointed to the Association’s first executive committee. He also served on the TCFA Board of Directors from 1967 to 1976 and again in 1983.

Walt was pretty busy with his studies at Texas A&M in the earliest years of TCFA’s existence, but he still came home to help run the family feedyard during breaks. “I did get to work every summer to help pay for college,” he said, adding that he also attended TCFA meetings with his father. He became intimately familiar with TCFA’s efforts and says he knew every one of TCFA’s



Walt with his father in 1997. The elder Lasley passed away in 2002.



past board presidents and chairmen personally. And having been involved with TCFA right from the beginning, Walt is solidly convinced that the Association has made a difference.

“I don’t see how cattle feeding in our area could have evolved to what it has become today without TCFA,” Walt said. “We would have had a lot more problems legislatively and environmentally. You just look at all the issues that TCFA has lobbied on in the past. TCFA’s efforts have definitely had positive effects on feedyards and their customers. All the issues that TCFA has fought through the years have benefited and helped the growth of the industry in this area.”

Now that he’s at the helm, Walt knows that TCFA must continue working hard on behalf of cattle feeders. And the two big issues to tackle remain the high cost of feedgrains and recovering our foreign export markets.

On the matter of feed prices, Walt said, “We’re certainly in a time of a change with the changing grain markets due to the government’s ethanol policy and the Congressional mandates that have been forced upon us. It’s certainly changed our landscape in the cattle feeding industry.”

Walt believes that, “as margin players,” the cattle feeding industry will eventually absorb higher feed prices “in some form or fashion.”

“We’re giving more for grain, so we’re going to have to give less for something else. Normally that’s come from feeder cattle. But we’re short enough on feeder cattle that that hasn’t happened as dramatically as it did in the past. Our cattle cycle hasn’t built up as much as it normally would have, and I think that’s one reason we haven’t seen feeder cattle prices decrease as much as they would have in years past. It’s made us search for different feedstuffs. We’re still in that search, trying to find something that we can use to offset higher costs.”

While cattle feeders in the TCFA area continue adjusting to

the feed prices, Walt believes it is essential to bring more ethanol plants to our region. “I think we need to work to have those byproducts like DDGs available to TCFA member feedyards in order to keep us competitive with other yards.”

Walt is also optimistic that hardships caused by ethanol’s inflationary impact on feedgrains will be short-lived. “It’s going to be interesting to see how long ethanol is going to be a factor in our business. It is a big factor today, but I’m not so sure that it will be in two or three years as other technologies come along,” he said. “There will be a lot more efficient ways of producing renewable fuels than there are today. And that will give us some relief in the grain market.”

Regaining access to foreign markets for U.S. beef is an issue where Walt believes TCFA has a major role to play in working with our nation’s political leaders and trade officials. He’s encouraged by the recent agreement with South Korea but points out that there’s still the matter of making sure that the agreement is honored. And getting Japan to fully reopen and increasing exports to China are significant priorities.

“I think we’ll see our exports grow again. I think we’ll eventually work through the roadblocks that other foreign governments have put up, and we’ll see our exports expand.”

He characterizes most of those “roadblocks” as “just absolute politics. It’s trade protectionism totally, I believe, and we’ve just got to get over those obstacles they (foreign governments) put in front of us.”

Two other issues that Walt foresees affecting the short term future of cattle feeding are animal rights activism and the consumer-driven trends that have popularized so-called “natural” products and age and source verification. But Walt says both issues offer prime examples of how TCFA does a good job providing its members with necessary resources. “TCFA’s Beef

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Safety and Quality Assurance Program covers a lot of those animal handling issues. TCFA has addressed the way we

process and handle our cattle, and that’s an area we can’t fall down on,” Walt said.

No doubt 2008 is a challenging year for cattle feeders—with ethanol, historically high grain prices, beef trade blockages, animal activism, COOL, farm bill negotiations, labor shortages, environmental regulations and numerous other issues to tackle. Providing experienced leadership and a steady hand for TCFA’s members and staff as they navigate these many challenges will keep Walt more than a little busy. Fortunately our chairman is someone who’s spent his life standing up to tough times and fighting his way through to better days. 🐾

EDITOR’S NOTE—James Hunt is TCFA Communications Director.